Affinity Project
Interview with Peter Lamborn Wilson
2009

Retrieved on December 21, 2009 from affinityproject.org

**lib.anarhija.net**

# Interview with Peter Lamborn Wilson

Affinity Project

2009

# Contents

AP: Well even with Katrina, in the wake of that people started to wake up, and see what's going on. It raised that awareness of racism.

PLW: Well you can't be non-white in America and not be constantly conscious of that, but it apparently also just does not mean that radical goals of black and other communities are being met. Somehow, nothing happens, even there with all their consciousness. So maybe, as Nietzsche pointed out, consciousness is not the point.

AP: Sometimes consciousness is oppressive.

PLW: He opted for pure expression over consciousness for that very reason, I think.



# Part 1 of 2: On Islam

Affinity Project: Would you define yourself as a Muslim, and if so, what kind of Islam would you say you practice amongst the multiplicity of different forms?

Peter Lamborn Wilson: Well, I've been many things in my life and I don't renounce any of them. But I don't necessarily practice any of them on a daily basis either. I never renounced Christianity or if I did, I take it back. I've been involved in Tantric things that I guess you could call Hinduism, although that's a very vague term. I practice Shia Islam. I still consider myself all those things but, obviously that's a difficult position to take vis-a-vis the orthodox practitioners of these different faiths. So, if I had to define my position now in terms that would be historically meaningful in an Islamic context, I would refer to Hazrat Inayat Khan and his idea of universalism, that all religions are true. And if this involves contradiction, as Emerson said, OK. We'll just deal with it on a different level. And the inspiration for this in his case was Indian synchrotism, between Hinduism and Islam especially, although other religions were involved too such as Christianity, Judaism and others. This happened on both a non-literate level of the peasantry and still persists to this day on that level, and also occurred on a very high level of intellectual Sufism which was almost a courtly thing at certain times, especially under some of the wilder Mughal rulers like Akbar who started Din-i Ilahi. So these things have precedents within the Islamic traditions, this universalism, this radical tolerance would be another way of putting it, but nowadays of course it's hard to find this praxis on the ground. I can't practice some Indian village cult here, that would be a little — well I sort of do, you know — but actually (laughs), it's highly personal.

AP: Would you say that it's radically tolerant or radically accepting? I would say that there is a distinction between tolerance and acceptance.

PLW: I know what you're getting at. Tolerance in this sense is a kind of weak position, and acceptance would be a strong position?

AP: I would say that, for example, I can tolerate homosexuals, Muslim homosexuals, or I can say well I accept them in the fold of Islam because they define themselves as Muslim.

PLW: Using the term in that sense, what I mean by radical tolerance is what you're calling acceptance. In other words it's not just ecumenicalism here. It's not a reformist position. It's a pretty radical position. And it got Hazrat Inayat Khan in a lot of trouble amongst orthodox Muslims. This movement still suffers from that today. But in India, there is this tradition of that, it still persists in India more than in other countries where the fundamentalist/reformist/modernist thing has swept away the so-called medieval creations which make up all the charm and difference. That's what they hate.

AP: What is it that interested or intrigued you in Islam in particular? And I believe you were introduced to it in Morocco, was it?

PLW: Well really, in New York. This goes back to the 60s and my involvement in one of the — I guess you could say — new religions of that era which came out of Moor Science tradition. I don't know if you've read any of my stuff on this. So already in New York I was taking an interest in these things.

AP: And why was that?

PLW: Well, because I got contact into that movement and also began to read Al-Ghazali on the recommendation of some of the people in that movement and we all became very interested in trying to find out whether there was such a thing as living Sufism. This was the 60s, there was no 'new-age' there on the ground. None of these people were so visibly active. Anyway, we didn't find them. So that was one of my reasons for going to the East.

AP: Well that's one of the things that is associated with Al-Ghazali, especially with regards to the fact that he was considered, or considered himself to be a Sufi. And then I believe that before



PLW: It's a paradox that we're flying into. This distance of objective social, political and economic reality. This is the paradox, you can't do anything without publicity, but publicity is unfortunately so often a way of destroying it. That's what I meant by thinking about failure, how can we think about failure in a positive way? Maybe it really is true that the only way to really spread the information so that it meant something would have been for people to walk all the way to Mexico and then walk all the way back with the gospel. And go through villages, speaking to people in diners. Maybe that's the only way it'll work. I don't know, I'm purely fantasizing this. Because it didn't happen that way, so we'll never know. So that idea of a theatre group, traveling caravans, I like that model, and I expect to see it develop more and more. And I expect that it will be very low tech, both for economic reasons and I hope for ideological reasons. Aesthetic reasons.

AP: CrimethInc, have you heard of that group before? I feel like that group kind of encourages people to take its form, I don't know exactly how it works, that's one of the things about it, I guess, but…

PLW: I have to say that although I know they've read my books they're not particularly in touch with me and actually, I appreciate that. So I don't know so much about how they work.

AP: I don't think many people do. But everyone reads their books now.

PLW: I like a lot of what they have to say, I think they were very soft on the election thing, they made some big mistakes there, I think some of them were involved with that anarchist get out the vote thing bullshit. What a stupid waste of time. If anyone, they should be getting out the vote for Bush so, bring on the shit you know, next time maybe the Republicans will have an actual coup d'etat with tanks on the street, that might wake people up.

AP: Last inauguration was almost that.

PLW: Pretty close. It's only that the Democrats are such utter fucking wimps that there were no tanks on the street.

the capitalist sphere, even it's just a group that collects insulators, if you go to one of those groups it's not an authoritarian meeting, you know. There's no one telling everyone what to do, and everyone's gonna have their turn. It's a little autonomous zone, these hobby groups. Churches function this way for some people. I was gonna say earlier, behind the idea of a Temporary Autonomous Zone is the idea of the Third Place, which is neither home nor work.

AP: Yes, Starbucks —

PLW: Is that what they call it?

AP: Yeah.

PLW: Oh fuck. (laughs) We'll have to give that up then. I was about to launch that myself as a slogan.

AP: I think the Third Place is still valid, though. You can steal it back from Starbucks.

PLW: Bastards!

AP: Well back to Marcos, I think it's this figure that acts as a point of access, and once people go through it, it kind of blows up into this multiplicity.

PLW: It's great to see that you can actually do militant things with these anarchist organizational models. That's terrific, that's what got me so excited.

AP: Well what about the representational value of that form, do you think it has value here?

PLW: I wonder if the fact that support for the Zapatistas began at the very moment that the Internet was taking off may have been one of the reasons the model has failed to spread in a meaningful way. That has occurred to me. In other words, the splashing of the image of the Zapatistas was counter-productive in some way. I don't know, I can't think through the implications.

AP: One of the things I know that the image did allow for, as opposed to just any other Mayan or Mestizo uprising which would have been completely crushed by the government, they allowed them to survive because of so much of the fact that everyone knew they existed.



he had passed away he had become a Sunni. And then he began to take more of a Sunni sort of path, and highlighted nonetheless of Sufism and the spiritual element with regards to the necessity of spirituality, the return to Islam.

PLW: Yeah sure, he was a great intellectual epitome of that position in a lot of ways. But we weren't reading him from that point of view because we weren't reading him from inside Islam. We were reading *The Alchemy of Happiness* and it was psychadelic. It was like, "Hey, why are we reading this *Tibetan Book of the Dead* stuff, this is really far out." And it's only years later that I came to see Al-Ghazali as this bastion of orthodoxy within Sufism. And this is how he's perceived in the tradition, you're quite right. But that isn't how we were reading it. And we got hold of a few other things some Ibn Arabi, very little, but we weren't scholars, we weren't Islamologists. There were such people around but they never would have occurred to us.

AP: But obviously in Islam, and I'm sure you're aware of this, is the concept of Ijithad…

PLW: More in Shi'ism.

AP: …the fact that it is the duty of every Muslim, male or female, child or eldery, to strive to get to know more about Islam, more about the world, etc., as much as s/he can. Is that one of the things that interested you as well is that it's sort of an infinitum of desire to learn, to know what is the responsibility of every single individual — not just a particular scholar — and therefore removing the element of authority that exists within Islam?

PLW: I don't know whether I grasp that very fully in my initial contacts with the thing, because I wasn't reading Islam, I wasn't reading Sufism per se. So in other words these dialectical aspects that you're pointing out here were not so clear to me at the beginning. They're very clear to me now, I could almost say in a retrospective position, which I might take now. In that sense yes, obviously, this is one of the key elements that makes certain aspects of Islam interesting to certain aspects of anarchism, that precise thing

which is often being called 'democracy.' Sociologists would label this as a 'democratic tendency' within Islam as compared to other religions and they would point out that the Ulema, although technically speaking do not occupy an authoritarian position, in practice often do. And especially now.

AP: Why do you think that is? Why do you think that turns out?

PLW: Well, I don't know. It's like the old saying, Sufism was once reality without a name and now it's a name without reality. We could talk about this in a completely Islamic way as the corruption and decline of the true original Islam, which for Sufism is not fundamentalist but is Sufi. The real origins are mystical origins. That's just the sociology of institutions from a secular point of view, what we're looking at is that institutions that become authoritarian, especially when they last for thousands of years. Yes?

AP: Yeah.

PLW: We could go on, we could go into Maxine Rodinson's critique of Islam as not having enough of a doctrinal framework to really be considered as opposed to capitalism. Have you read him?

AP: No, I haven't read him on Islam but I think with regards to the aspect of the anti-capitalist sentiments that exist within Islam, particularly with a pillar of Islam which is Zakat and the way of Islam…

PLW: And again, Shi'ism adds 'social justice' to the pillars, so if you combine those two you get as Ali Shariati did, you get the possibility of an Islamic socialism with strong non-authoritarian tendencies.

AP: Would you say an Islamic socialism or an Islamic anarchism?

PLW: No, in his case socialism. He did not go all the way to anarchism. He was interested, I think, in some anarchist thinkers but he didn't see that as… he was looking for something practical for Iran, I think, and as much as possible he embraced Sufism and anti-authoritarianism. His movement didn't, particularly; I'm talking about him as an individual thinker whom I find quite interesting



examples of things and spread the possibility through the examples, experiments.

PLW: And if there was any money in it, then it would be on MTV.

AP: This regression away from using the internet or anything like that, what about the possibility of traveling and doing, maybe even plays or talks about different perspectives or ideas through actually meeting people and connectivity, again which requires resources.

PLW: It does, and there was a vanguard theatre group doing some of this stuff back in the 80s, it was doing some of this, they would do plays on the subway and on the street, and they would basically pick one person as the audience and create a situation around that person. That's real political theatre, and they were getting some interesting psychological results but I don't think it went anywhere as a movement. I keep hearing about like, people telling me did you hear about the latest, acoustic punk, and I said no I haven't heard of that but I wish that well too. There's always something stirring, the question is do you want to put it up on the internet so everyone will make a bad copy of it, or what? What do you want to do with this example? Basically I would say, we have to be existentialists and do it ourselves. It really is a do it yourself situation, and if you're not, you're just missing the boat, missing the fun, the possible pleasure. So that would have to be the motivation.

AP: And the Marcos question, it seems to me that this symbol of a very Fidelista sort of dictator, but then at the same time it turned out it wasn't a dictator, it almost acted as a sort of hologram through which everyone spoke, do you think that has potential in North America?

PLW: Oh, that form they were using is something that just actually, you find that being used in the Ladies' clubs now, they don't use *Roberts' Rules* anymore, they pass the baton now…

AP: Like the Red Hats…

PLW: Yeah (laughs). This is what I say, what's amazing is anarchism has been so successful in certain ways, a lot around formal process, especially anything that's gonna be carried out outside of

shit out of the closet and brush it off. Because it's gonna be good cop, bad cop from now until the end of the world and they'll be making a tremendous profit off all of that.

AP: Well one of the reasons I think that happened was that this new American hegemonic union movement, that started the anti-globalization movement by their research into different corporations and how they were trading, so I think that it was sort of led by this sort of socialist-capitalist nexus that goes on in the new left in the state. I got a bit of a taste of it, working for a union once, and it's crazy.

PLW: 11% of the American workforce is unionized and you know how much of that is just basically reactionary crap. So forget it.

AP: They're human resources departments for corporations, essentially.

PLW: The I.W.W. only has about 2,000 members. And that's the only good union I know of.

AP: There's still the possibility that it's not that it's impossible for this sort of cohesive idea to come about, it's that… we just haven't done it.

PLW: Well it looks like Gustav Landauer, who's someone everyone will read, it said that revolution is not something that is determined in a Marxist sense by history, it's something that's a possibility within the soul. This is the State, the relationship between souls, and not something outside us that we can break. This is one of Landauer's greatest contributions to realize these things on behalf of anarchism. And to point out once and for all that this idea of Progress towards the one single industrial world is as hellish as the capitalist proposal.

AP: Right.

PLW: And of course, they stomped him to death. And that was the end of that.

AP: What do you think of the idea of putting forward examples of things that are already going on, and sort of trying to highlight



and even sympathetic in a lot of ways. And I'm sorry I didn't get to know him when I was in Iran.

AP: Tell me, would you see the nodes of intersection that could become, in sort of Deleuze and Guattari's terms, lines of flight between Islam and anarchism? What do you see between both these movements?

PLW: Well, in my own work, I've tended to concentrate on the heretical penumbra. Extreme Sufism, Ishmaelism. If orthodox Sunni Islam is going to be taken as the norm, then this is not the norm. I would question this whole picture, but it is the picture of Islamology so let's just go with it and say, as I myself have said in subtitling my books on Islam and heresy, 'On the Margins of Islam,' and I think it's here in the penumbral aspects, the illumination around the dark body, that the interesting intersections occur. Now I was criticized in *Fifth Estate* by Barkley, for talking about Sufism as an anarchistoid element in Islam. He proposed a sort of Islamic puritanism and its democratic structure as something closer to anarchism. I was respectful of his critique, but on the other hand I had to disagree. I find the whole puritannical thing unsympathetic. It's freedom on every level that I'm interested in, not just freedom in the assembly. So this I find amongst the wild dervishes.

AP: Well it's the aspect that, if there's no compulsion in religion, how can there be compulsion with regards to anything?

PLW: And it's not often written because of the dangers of writing some of these things. It's expressed in poetry, poetry has the license for this. And you can say, as Mahmud Shabistari said, if Muslims only understood the truth they wouldn't become idol-worshippers. Did he get away with it? I don't think they killed him, because it was poetry.

AP: There's a lot of songs, too.

PLW: Yeah, because all Persian and Urdu, and I suppose Arabic poetry too, if it's written in a traditional meter, it can be sung to traditional modes. And certain meters are connected to certain modes. So you even have the tune already laid out. And then it's just up to

you to do interesting variations on it. A Bardic reality which lacks into the Elizabethan period in the West.

AP: I spent some time with Naqshbandi Sufis in Montreal. What astonished me was that after a particular period of time, spending time with them, when I was actually considering embracing more of the Sufi elements that exist within Islam, I was a bit taken back by the issue of the Bayiah, which is the allegiance and the quest for allegiance. What do you think about that?

PLW: Well I've written about this. A very important influence has been the whole Uwaisi tradition, which is the anti-guru tradition within Sufism. This is based on the idea that you can seek initiation on the spiritual plane, such as in dreams or like the the Uwaisis in Turkey were actually influenced by Shamanism, they would actually meet magical animals or ghosts who would initiate them, and Julian Baldic wrote a nice book about this called Imaginary Muslims…

AP: I'm assuming those magical animals were not Djinn.

PLW: Well yeah, sure they were Djinn. And some of the Djinns were believers, too. Dealing with Djinns is not like necromancy, in the Christian West. Dealing with Djinn can be white magic, quite easily. This is why hermeticism is an easier time within traditional Islam than it has been within traditional Christian cultures.

AP: Where do you see Islam going, especially post-9/11? Where do you see Islam going on its own, and I'd like to hear your comments on what you expect that, for example, what Islam can bring to the table that something like anarchism can not bring to the table? Or vice-versa?

PLW: Well that's sort of crystal ball stuff, which has to be taken with a grain of salt (which is also crystal). I don't see much good ahead in Islamic culture or in the Western culture so it's hard to compare them in that sense. Sufism and radical tolerance and all these ideas seem to be on the retreat in the Islamic world. At least as we look at it from here. My finger is not on the pulse of the East here, but I'm looking at what's going on in America where



to be a magic formula for setting all of this into motion. Because if there were someone would have taken that step already. Maybe there's no one brilliant enough to see it yet. That would be the leadership theory, leading back to well, we need a new Malcolm X or something.

AP: Maybe it's either discovered and hasn't been acted upon, or there's a cohesive component that is yet undiscovered. It needs to be discovered…

PLW: I question whether anything is possible in America given the changes that have been happening here since the 1950s. In other words, we have an economy here that basically produces nothing, which is based on service, and on image, an economy of image actually, and as one of my old anarchist friends said to me, well no one knows how to do anything anymore. Most people can't even cook. Americans just can't do anything. We don't know how to make anything, we can't do anything.

AP: True prisoners who know how to do nothing. Everything is left to other people.

PLW: Yeah and you do some shit with mailbags. And that's what most people's work amounts to. It might be very fascinating on the computer but it's still just sewing mailbags for somebody else. We haven't changed that much, it's been the same problem for the last 6000 years.

## Unions, Movements, Revolutions

AP: One of the start-stops that I saw happen in the last 10 years was the anti-globalization movement. It really started to move and then there were all the failings of it.

PLW: Also it got taken over by the new globalism, which is the American hegemonic globalism. So now suddenly everyone has to spend all their time, bent out of shape about the Bushites. And they've forgotten about globalism. Just wait until we get another fuckin Democratic president again and they'll have to take all that

if you've had any ideas about how those relays can happen, or if you've thought about that before.

PLW: Sure. Like I say, I think about it all the time. But I also find myself sinking towards despair on a lot of these questions, because although the bits and pieces are everywhere on the ground, somehow everything just fails to cohere. And the idea that there could be a movement having this grand appeal to many people, and yet nothing gets underway. And the reason for that, I think, must lie in this realm of the image, the hegemonic image. It works most of all in the subconscious. So whatever you may be theorizing about anarchism or the viable economic alternatives, on the subsconscious level you're overwhelmed by this hegemonic imagery.

AP: The fear of slipping into it, you mean…

PLW: Whatever the form it might take. Just because we all spend our lives completely surrounded by images all the time, which are acting on the subconscious. In fact, usually one has no conscious control over the subconscious. This leads to terrible problems and it's also kind of interesting that the whole idea of the subconscious is kind of missing from the left now. Freudianism has been thrown out with Marxism and now it's among the things we can't discuss. This is why I'm interested in magic. If we're talking about theory work, and talking about influencing reality through theory work, then we're talking about magic. Perhaps this is the spiritual tradition that we should be facing.

AP: There is a group called practical magic…

PLW: I've been saying this for years, so perhaps even they have read my work too, I don't know. But Giardano Bruno is the man everyone should be reading.

AP: The other thing is, back to the issue of Himma, before Himma begins though Imam needs to be there. Imam, that's the spirituality.

PLW: So we're imagining that anarchism is the faith… and the Himma, the will or the intention to do something about it takes us to the realm between theory and practice that you brought up. Yes? That would be the structure of it. But again, there doesn't appear



you've got all these people publishing books called 'What's Right with Islam.'

AP: Or *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, that sort of thing.

PLW: I'm already so sick of this. And the liberal Muslims, why are they trying to make Islam in the image of reform Judaism? Why not pick something more exciting, like Sufism? As far as I can tell, these people are ignorant of Sufism and if they know anything about it, they agree with the reformers that it's a medieval ecretion that should be swept away.

AP: Do you believe it's an aspect of literacy that occurs here in the West, especially the new generation of Muslims, that they are born into a Muslim family, their family had migrated to North America, and they essentially know this thing which is called Islam but they sort of take it for granted apart from the ritualistic aspects or cultural aspects that exist within it. They never really truly identity with Islam, all they get is the surface level.

PLW: There are several interesting things going on in this respect. The Muslim punk movement, with Michael Muhammad Knight, he told me recently that his imagination seems to have started to come to life. There are actually Muslim punk bands and there weren't when he wrote the book, which is wonderful. And I hear from people like you're talking about, college students who suddenly realize that they've got roots, and these roots are interesting. But they can't stomach all this crap that's going on, so some of them find their way to my work.

AP: The other side of the coin with regards to college students, from what I've seen, is they actually turn the other way. They become very religious, very pious all of a sudden, and they start to develop a very hard line as to what is there in terms of Islam, and the concepts of Islam, and become very alienating to other Muslims and the people around them.

PLW: I was thinking of that in terms of 'image magic.' It's very hard to struggle against global image. Now we have this global image of Islam. Whether it arouses waves of hatred or desire, that's

what we got. To be able to situate oneself even in a critical position to the image is so difficult, much less to exist outside it. That takes some wellspring of Himma. It's so difficult when you're on your own. Islam is a very communitarian religion and to be on your own, yes you can in theory, everyone is their own Imam in theory, but in practice with the sociology of institutions at work, it's so difficult to move against that sludge.

AP: What do you think it will take to break down that sociology of institutions. Do we need another Malcolm X or Elijah Muhammad to come about with reformed knowledge, or does it come with opening up zones or spaces and people become nomads coming in and out of those spaces, and Islam.

PLW: All those things would be nice. It would be nice to have some voices coming from the Islamic world that aren't either fundamentalist or anti-fundamentalist. It would be nice to have voices come from the Islamic world that remember something about the movement of the social, and haven't just given up on it before this wretched fundamentalism. It would be interesting to have young Muslims in America and England and France where it's at least possible to speak, to start working on these alternatives which we don't even know what they are. Maybe they're these seeds, but we can't talk about anything that's actually sprouting. That would be very difficult.

AP: What could Islams learn from anarchisms?

PLW: Phrased that way, we might be able to work with that question a little. The spiritual element within anarchism is already such a tiny minority, both intellectually and historically. It does exist and we could even talk about the Catholic workers, and I do consider myself a part of it, but it's an almost inaudible voice even within anarchism. And again, if we're talking about the wild dervishes within Islam, well most of these guys are living in the Middle Ages, and for their sake I hope they manage to succeed in continuing to do so. But they don't have anything to learn from anarchism, they're practicing it. And anarchists don't particularly have anything to learn



## Image and Myth

PLW: The bits and pieces are there on the ground. What's lacking somehow is cohesive spirit, which brings me back again to spirituality. I just don't see how it can be done without what Sorel called the Myth. And of course he was thinking of something somewhat different than what you and I might. But, there's got to be this extra spark of spiritual determination.

AP: Well that's the whole thing with the hidden Ram, whether it is from Shi'a perspective or a Sunni, the Mahdi is going to come, the hidden Imam is going to come, that doesn't mean that you should stop doing what you are doing. The sky doesn't rain gold and silver, that sort of thing, for it to actually work. Whether it happens, whether the hidden Imam is each one of us, or us collectively, or whatever it may be according to whatever interpretation, we need to keep on doing the work that we need to keep on doing.

PLW: Absolutely and one can do no other, as Luther said. But still to suffer any delusions about the power of this theory work, that you will actually change anything on the ground without intervening actual praxis, that would be a terrible mistake, and I think it's a mistake we've all fallen into.

AP: One of the things people talk about a lot are providing bridges or relays between theory and practices. And specifically, writing about and thinking about this, really the gap is not between theory and lower theory, but theory and oral tradition, because a lot of people don't read. I feel like a lot of people CAN read, if you give them a sheet of paper they'll read it, but it doesn't mean that they're actually literate. There are different forms of literacy, most people can't concentrate very long to read entire books and they won't, they don't have the time for it, it doesn't mean they're not interested, and most people come to ideas by actually sitting around and having conversations about it. That's how I came into anarchism, before I became an academic I couldn't read. I don't know

PLW: Well I know, some of these ideas slipped out, crept out into the language, which of course I was pleased when you make an actual contribution to language like that. And I never did consider these ideas as my ideas, I didn't invent the T.A.Z. I just noticed it. It's the same problem with giving value to these mutual aid networks. The T.A.Z. has always been there, it's a question of valuing it, and seeing that certain technological trends in history have given it a new importance, a new luminocity that it didn't have before, it shines by its own light now. Given an economic collapse in the United States, it would be short of Armageddon, but it would be more serious than the Great Depression. And that's one of the things that it is possible to foresee. So suddenly one of the practical aspects of a lot of these theoretical ideas would suddenly force themselves on people, so I guess our task as theory-mongerers is to come up with words that will make this possible, in other words not to use words like socialism I guess, but to think of a new term.

AP: And one of the things is not just sitting around and waiting for the economy to collapse.

PLW: No, we can't just sit around and wait. That's what Marx did, and Fourier, and all these lonely old men sitting in their rooms with beards… (laughs) … but what will it take to get Americans to give up their SUVs? Apparently only kicking and screaming. So if that happens then suddenly these new options will take on a new life. But in the meantime, all we can do is the theory work. But to mistake the theory work for the work, that's a deadly mistake. To say that putting up a website IS the work, that's the deadly mistake. And it's so seductive to fall into. Especially when there are no other institutions asking for your time and energy. And to ask people to create those institutions, that's asking too much.

AP: It's asking a lot.

PLW: It's asking a lot. Maybe too much.

AP: A lot of people try to do stuff, like I mean the Insitute for Social Ecology was an attempt to try to set up an alternative formation of an institution.



from them, it would just be sort of nice to take inspiration, to cross-fertilize while retaining the differences. No ghastly unity, like the ideals of fundamentalism and capitalism, but to embrace difference.

AP: Let's say those dervishes would not be required to identify as muslim anarchists, or as anarchist muslims, but rather retain their identity.

PLW: It would be so historically difficult to make up some hybrid like that, just as it is so historically difficult to deal with the idea of gay Islam. Gay is the wrong word. It's just not a concept in the Islamic world. Really it means shallow Westernization, and naturally that's resisted. The strategy is wrong. The strategy should go to the Sufi love poetry, that's what the strategy should be. And these wacko 19th century pseudo-scientific Greek terms like homosexual and these lifestyle labels like gay should just be ignored.

AP: Should we go back to an oral tradition in Islam, if people aren't reading to the extent they should, is it better to stand on a box and talk to muslims, or go to the mosque to open these forums for discussions. The problem with that is if they don't like what they hear, you become visible.

PLW: Islam is a missionary religion and always has been. We could talk about Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, it's hard to find other such intensely missionary religions, so it would be hard to separate out the element of Tablee'kh, of propaganda of the faith, from any view that Islam might have of itself.

AP: How do reconcile that fact of Tablee'kh, which specifically came out from places like Pakistan, and which you actually see here in North America. You'll have these moments in Toronto or Montreal and they knock at your door in compulsion of religion.

PLW: Well it would be nice if there were counter-organizations, but I don't really see much evidence of it. Maybe you're more in touch with the fine currents here, which I imagine someone has to be on the line to be in touch with, and it would be nice if something would emerge, in terms of a counter-Tablee'kh, I don't know. Agitprop? And it would have to be couched in Islamic terms. And that's

why I'm saying that Sufism could be so important. And it's being ignored by all the counter-moves against Islamism.

AP: With regards to Muslim scholars in the West, I'm not sure you're familiar with Dr. Tariq Ramadan? He's married to the granddaughter of Hassan Al-Banna who started the Muslim brotherhood in 1948. He lives in Switzerland and migrates between Switzerland, France, England, and he often comes to North America and was supposed to teach in the States. As he was about to come in, the Department of Defense or Homeland Security forbid him from coming in. He's done some work on commenting on the left and the aspect of co-operatives as alternatives to capitalist space and organization. The issue with his work is, as far as I know, the lack of exposure to anarchisms. Have you read anything by him?

PLW: I haven't so I can't comment, but it'd be nice if he would read some Charles Fourier. But dream on, right?

AP: How do you feel about post-structuralism and whatever influence it might have on Islam?

PLW: Well I just wrote a little review of this book on Foucault and the Iranian Revolution. I didn't actually see the whole commentary, only Foucault's part, in First of the Month in New York, and I pointed out that it's true that Foucault was quite wrong in assessing the Iranian Revolution, and he had seen Ali Shariati as much more important than he actually turned out to be, sadly. His critics, including Maxime Rodinson, who wrote a very perceptive and not-nasty criticism, but a strong critique that really demolished Foucault's position.

AP: How did he get caught up in the Iranian Revolution? How did it happen to him, of all people?

PLW: He thought he had missed all the other revolutions and this was his chance. Just like Genet who went to the Palestineans in part because 'at least there's something, this is a chance.' Romanticism, and I'm a romantic myself, I sympathize. I compared the two, Genet's book with Foucault's work and said that desire had played a part in both cases. When he got to Tehran they were marching in



enough people that are hard-up and scrambling. It's true that everyone's got their gadgets and so forth, but things can change quickly for a lot of people. One little twitch in the economy and it could all collapse for them.

AP: I know in Canada a lot of people struggling.

PLW: And people would be looking for viable alternatives.

AP: One of the ideas I had around mutual aid and the issue of how it's already going around, in most mainly lower-class communities in Canada specifically, in the States definitely too, is that the things people need done, they get done by all these myriad of tradeoffs that go on.

PLW: The sad thing is that they never value it.

AP: No, they don't even think of it. That's a major issue. They don't see that as a valuable thing, they see it as something like I have to do this because I'm poor.

PLW: It's the same thing with the Cubans with their organic gardens. Because they couldn't afford the fertilizers, that's why they started doing it. And I'm afraid that when Castro dies and the mafia takes over again, all that will disappear.

AP: What do you think of a tactic of valourizing that or People's History Projects, social stuff about it; the depth is there in the networks, but there's not a lot of consciousness about where they are. I always thought about projects trying to raise the consciousness of it and try to bring it up politically. Black Panther model sort of thing, but without the hierarchy…

PLW: Yeah without the inflammatory rhetoric…

AP: Without the guns.

PLW: Without the pictures of the guns.

AP: Or the anti-semitism.

PLW: Yeah, yeah…

AP: It surprised me to know that you didn't know that lots of people in the anarchist community are looking at the T.A.Z. and S.P.A.Z. and these issues.

PLW: Stuff like that has got to be done. Without some organization on that level, all this communication stuff is just froth, I'm afraid. And I say that as someone that's devoted my life to it. To the froth, I mean. (laughs)

AP: There are certain places, too. When I'm thinking about Islam and anarchism, once again I'm thinking about Muslims that have capital, that have some sort of resources, that could be utilized by anarchists if communication…

PLW: Anarchist Osama? (laughs) The anarchist banker that Fernando Pessoa dreamed of?

AP: No but if there are collective goals that I see between Islams and anarchisms, that if a form of solidarity is established based on discussions, then they could actually take off and begin to support one another. Anarchists could provide different tactics that have been going on and used…

PLW: Take a look at one of the major reasons that Islamic fundamentalism is so successful, and that's because they make a point of organizing economic institutions on the street level. That's supposedly where all the money's coming from, although it's Saudi oil money…

AP: Would you say it's on the street level? No doubt some of it is, but there are also people who hold a great deal of money who are also contributing to that. There are a great deal of people in Saudi Arabia on the royal family level see Osama do what he's doing because then the Iraq oil would be tapped into and America could stay in…

PLW: Well sure there's the macro-political thing, but I say one of the reasons they're successful though is because they do pay attention to Hamans and elementary schools and things like that. Which apparently the Islamic socialist groups failed in this. They did not manage to institute these things at the street level where the real need was felt. And when the fundamentalists came along a decade later and actually started to do that, naturally people appreciate it. It's the same thing on a different plane here in America. There are



the street and shouting two names: Ayotallah Khomeini and Sharati. Later on, of course, there was only the one name. By then he realized how wrong he'd been and shut up on the subject. But my point was that he had been wrong but for the right reasons. His heart had been very good on this. His head had let him down. My heart also went out to him, even though I never went through a period of romanticizing the Iranian Revolution because I saw it up close, on the ground and I realized it was in control of the mullahs right from the start. I had to shed a little tear for Foucault and his lost love.

AP: How do you feel with regards to the issue of violence and pacifism in Islam? Do you believe that the concept of "suicide bombings" … well 9/11 is quite a different example from Palestine… but I'd like to hear you comment on both.

PLW: The only thing that really occurs to me that I can say on this is to point out how fascinating it is that the Hasan Al-Sabah archetype keeps turning up over and over again. If only Burrows were alive now, what a kick he would get out of this. He did realize that Khomeini was the sort of Hasan Al-Sabah type, which he was. And of course Osama is also, even though he's a Sunni which makes the comparison a little weird. Nevertheless, that's the archetype. He disappears up into the mountains and is never seen again. Believe me, he'll never be seen again. He'll live forever because of that. With the long white beard and sending out the Fedayeen to sacrifice themselves. It's an archetype that apparently just keeps popping up in Islam.

AP: I recently did a class talk with regards to Islam and sacrifice. It's interesting to see how the tactics have evolved with Iraq, 9/11 and Palestine. In Iraq the use of footage and videotape, the image and lighting that Deleuze talks about when he's discussing Bergsonian cinema, the aspect of the imagination colliding with reality. It places the viewer in the person who is being sacrificed. The use of the technique in Palestine, when they leave footage behind; now I'm not saying hostage-taking is the same as what happens in Pales-

tine, the two are different in terms of the context, but do you feel sympathy with Palestine and what goes on there?

PLW: I was remembering what happened with Karlheinz Stockhausen after 9/11, when he blurted out his statement about what a fantastic work of art it had been, and I believe the poor sucker is still hiding out somewhere from the fallout of making that statement. But I thought the statement was so obvious, it was a work of art. It was meant to be image manipulation and it succeeded fantastically well.

AP: Like propaganda of the deed?

PLW: It was a viral image, just absolutely did the total Burrowsian thing from the grey room into everybody's head instantly. In a situation like that, it's so difficult to sort out ethical and even moral strands. When you're just being swamped with the grand illusion, the Orwellianism to the degree that would have made Orwell keel over in a dead faint. It's just a gargantuan behemoth of imagery, and it's got everybody.

AP: Do you think it was intentional to get that sort of image to the people?

PLW: Intention is such a… who cares, does it even matter?

AP: Well I think it does, like Islam says that all actions are but by intention.

PLW: I mean, clearly these people are media mavens. If they hadn't read McLuhan, it must just have seeped into their unconscious through the dreamworld or something. They're manipulating the image, of course they are. And so is the U.S. It's an image war. That's why Baudrillard said about the first Gulf War, a statement he got in so much trouble for, saying it never happened. Which I presume he didn't mean to belittle the deaths and suffering that actually occurred, but he was talking about this aspect of this Manichean spectacle of clashing imagery. Which is sometimes the same imagery which makes it even more complicated. So it's really kinda hard to even answer your question. Yes, I've always been sympathetic to the suffering of the Palestineans. How could



to avoid, the Cuban thing, which obviously didn't really work. But you have to have little revolutionary adventures otherwise things are just too boring.

AP: And it preserves that sort of spirit that you need.

PLW: And the Zaps are very inspiring, people should go down and bask in their glory. They've held out for 10 years.

AP: So there's a lot of problems with putting this into action. I know a lot of people have ideas. I know some people who are trying to start autonomous yet collective rural ventures. Urban stuff, there are social centres to some extent…

PLW: Not like Italy, though.

AP: No, not at all. But what do you see as some of the tactics you could think of that would get something started?

PLW: There has to be some economic organizing. There just has to be.

AP: Resources.

## Resources/ Economic Collapse

PLW: Yeah, I was about to start making a list of them when you showed up. There's the William Morris style printing collective, the CSA model which could be pushed towards merging with the remnants of the food co-op model, craft collectives dealing unfortunately to the wealthy, and there could be ways, I mean perhaps entrism should be tried with some of these green things. Entrism is what the Communists used to do, they would join other movements and try to push them towards Communism. So maybe anarchists should be a little more adventurous in this respect and try to join some of these local green things, which are often basically NIMBYism.

AP: With the Vermont workers' thing, that's definitely being done there right now, I don't know if you've heard of the Vermont workers' centre, there are quite a few anarchists involved in that. And these big unions of towns, they're illegal unions.

people are doing things on the ground. … How do you get the talk level synchronized on the ground?

PLW: That's what we do. In a normal society, presumably we would have some sort of economic function, even as artists. That's a fond dream. But in fact we don't unless we're absorbed into commodity world. So the whole thing is, yes it would be great to coordinate the talk with some action, but where's the action? This ecstacy of communication has just absorbed everything into itself.

AP: Why do you think that is?

PLW: I think it's a symptom of this total atomization which is a feature of pure late capital, or too late capital. Everybody's the same and everyone's separated. What I want is for everyone to be different and everyone together. I'm proposing a new revolutionary paradigm based on difference and solidarity rather than sameness and separation. Or, as in Communism, sameness and solidarity, and that's not a very viable model. We don't like it anymore. That's why Zapatismo helped me to arrive at this position. They said look, we're half-Mayan peasants and that's the way we like it. At the same time, this is revolution, and we want to express our solidarity with everybody else who could be in a similar situation. They didn't want people to come down and become weekend Zapatistas, because that's part of the old model that doesn't work. They wanted Zapatismo, or something like Zapatismo, to spring up here, there and everywhere.

AP: And how do you feel about people going to places like Chiapas and getting the experience of the models they're adopting there?

PLW: One Zapatista that I heard in New York talked about that their revolution was an empirical revolution not an ideological one. I like that expression and thought it was an interesting expression. I'm all for it. As I told you, I'm a romantic, so I even think it's nice to go and fight for somebody else's cause sometimes, if they want you to. The Zapatistas, I think for interesting reasons, didn't want that happening in the old Cuban model. That's what they were trying



one not be? But to say that I have any kind of political insight into it, no.

AP: With regards to the aspect of Islam and desire, let's talk about desire and homosexuality. How do you feel about there being no path with regards to desire, in an Islamic framework. Islam says that not everything you desire can be fulfilled, for example alcohol, hashish or homosexual activities. Do you think a re-interpretation takes that apart?

PLW: You could do this in an Islamic legal context, but would have to call in Ishmaelism and certain kinds of Shiaism, Sufism and so forth in order to do it. I think the way you would do it would be to point out there is no hierarchy in Islam. There's no Pope to call on his cardinals in this. A Fatwah can be issued but whether anybody follows it is a voluntary process. If you issued a Fatwah based on hermeneutic exigesis, on esoteric interpretations of Quran and Hadith, it'd be a question of whether you had the Ummah, whether the community would accept those Fatwahs. Right now we see that it's not likely. Although I understand there's a so-called gay mosque in Toronto, and I wish them well, but that would be the way it would have to be done. Unless we're gonna talk about social disintegration. And again, I think it would be worthwhile talking about this in order to avoid this schizophrenia in the very use of a term like 'gay Muslim.' Gay is about a consumerist lifestyle, and if that's what they're interested, then I'm not sympathetic (terribly). I mean do what you want to do, you know, it's like gay marriage; from an anarchist perspective this is all big head-scratcher, you know what I'm saying? Are we asking permission of the state here or what?

AP: Well it goes back to Lacan, you never escape the structure or image that society has placed for you… the politics of demand… you always go back and forth in circles.

PLW: It's why language is important. What theory is supposed to be about.

AP: Did Muslims waste a lot of time by trying to apologize for 9/11, trying to teach people about Islam to get away from stereotypes of the terrorist Muslim…

PLW: You tell me. Has there been any improvement as a result of these efforts?

AP: There's a lot more reading going on.

PLW: Yeah, but reading of what? Like we talked about.

AP: A lot of people are actually reading the Quran.

PLW: A lot of my teachers say it's a mistake to start with the Quran. Listen to it in Arabic, get the spiritual vibe but save the text for later.

AP: Particularly with regards to the Quran being used by people, who don't know much about Islam, to bring out the elements they consider hateful against Jews and Christians.

PLW: You've got the Christians reading the Quran saying "It's all full of violence!", and unfortunately no Muslims came back with a reading of the Bible but some liberals did it for them. From a scriptual perspective it's always a double-edged sword, which is another reason to leave the Quran for later.

AP: Do you think that Islam, if reinterpreted, would constitute a non-Western form of anarchism? Anarchism that existed before the term was coined?

PLW: I question the idea of non-Western. A lot of people consider Islam one of the Western tradition. After all, it goes all the way up to France. Yes, you can talk about 'the East' in the spiritual sense, but you can take it in the large sense of the whole monotheist tradition which is a kind of Eastern Mediterranean tradition, and also involved Judaism and Christianity, then how do you separate Islam and call it Eastern and the others Western? That would be a difficult road to hoe. Maybe pre-modern? Would that be a better word?

AP: Sure.

PLW: So like a pre-modern form of anarchism, like how the anarchists always look for their forebearers in the Tao Te Ching or



two forces and there was always the possibility of the third. And the rhizome was like this third force. But as soon as the two antitheses are subsumed into one, the third position is suddenly thrust into a new dialectic position.

AP: You think that's happened?

## Zapatismo

PLW: No. It should be happening but it isn't. I thought Zapatismo was the beginning of it, but I've been proven wrong apparently.

AP: In what sense?

PLW: I thought the new revolutionary paradigm was going to be revolutionary difference as well as solidarity. Instead of the one-world model of Communism and progressive socialists of the 19th Century, we were now going to accept that people could be different yet also have solidarity across those differences. And I don't see that happening, well I don't see it taking off as much as I was so looking forward to in my anti-pessimist moments.

AP: I think maybe it didn't blow up nearly as fast, but we were talking with Ashanti Alston, and they're actually working with the Zapatistas in Estacion Libre. And they've been having a lot of success bringing African Americans and Latinos and actually going down there to Chiapas. And they deal with the issues that are going on that keeps people divided.

PLW: But what about an Islamic Zapatismo, it should have appeared by now but it hasn't. What about what I was fondly calling urban Zapatismo? I don't see. Either people are clinging to the old 19th century progressive model, in the anarchist-mileu, or they're neo-primitivists online. That seems to be the major thing, here in America anyway.

AP: Well I do feel like poststructuralist interpretations of anarchism, whatever you want to call it, this new opening is taking hold and is starting to move forward at the talk level. But it's really starting to move forward now which I feel like will influence the way

a practical living sense. I think this had a strong post-structuralist influ ence and a multiplicity of getting rid capital Revolution and not having to conform to styles when getting in, because I find moving into anarchist subculture a lot of the time is being whittled away until you're the peg that fits in the hole, and that's how it goes, and that's always been extremely problematic for me. I was always resistant to that sort of thing. I think that's a major issue as far as having any sustainable stuff. Have you had a lot of contact with on-the-ground anarchist projects?

PLW: I did in the 80s and 90s but I've kind of given up on it not so much because I'm renouncing it, but I'm too exhausted for that. Also, I have to say, I don't see anything happening other than communication. Take Indymedia for example. It's facing the same problem as we discussed earlier. Either they're going to succeed and get nice job offers from major networks, or a big grant to make their film, or they're going to fail in which case they won't be heard except for their friends.

AP: But is failure OK then? If Indymedia doesn't ever become large, it stays as a communication network.

PLW: I think it depends on what you're going for. You have to have strategy as well as tactics. This is a big problem for all the Deleuze and Guattari people because they don't like the word strategy. They think strategy is authoritarian. But to me, strategy means are we capable of envisioning victory or are we not?

AP: What's victory?

PLW: Victory would be victory. You know?

AP: Most poststructuralists, I mean myself in the last few years, the study of strategy has mostly been about the fact that if you have a strategy you have to have some sort of end goal, that's a specific totalizing vision of something.

PLW: I understand all that. I understand this critique, but my response to it is based partly on the fact that, the 'triple world' that Deleuze and Guattari were discussing doesn't exist anymore. Now we have a unified world. Before we had the Spectacle which gave



what have you? Yeah. There's certainly some elements there that you could play with.

AP: That interpretation of pre-modernity would really be post-modernity, cause what's pre-modernity?

PLW: Yeah. And theory now, everything is up for grabs. This is the postmodern ecstacy, everything is up for grabs. If we don't allow it to fall into a posty-constructionist apathy of relativism. But look on it as a kind of positive thing.

AP: The possibilities. I think looking for more practical relations, in terms of looking at local Muslim communities and speaking with them about the anarchist tradition.

PLW: We're talked about some of the possible points in a constellation that could be presented already.

AP: The aspect of consensus, of social solidarity, of acceptance…

PLW: You could put the emphasis on those things, pre-modern aspects, and you could talk about what we could call medieval aspects, like the wild dervishes. And between those two poles, perhaps something interesting would begin to spark.

AP: How would you deal with those legalistic people who would…

PLW: That's what I said, you get Fatwahs based on an esoteric position as you could, for example from a Shi'ite or Ishmaeli authority. Or someone who is both Sufi and orthodox, like an Algazel, that's the kind of position that's so sadly missing. If that kind of position existed in Islam in a normative way, we wouldn't even be having this conversation.

AP: I think certainly with regards to Sufism, you pointed out with Al-Ghazali particularly, I think it's the aspect of spirituality being blended in or returning back, but unless you get something out of it it just becomes repetitive.

PLW: That would be a good definition of Sufism, you just gave. In this sense it's not a separate tradition of Islam. The Orientalist view of it being that is wrong.

AP: What about the adoption of techniques of innovation? How do you feel it would…

PLW: Well that's Bidi'a, and we can't call it that, we have to call it Ijtihad, then we can do it.

AP: But once again, Umar always said that sometimes there are good Bidi'as and sometimes there are bad Bidi'a.

PLW: Did he say that?

AP: Yeah. Sometimes there are good innovations and sometimes there are bad innovations. I recall the story of Umar and a woman standing up and correcting him, because he had a particular point of view with regards to something… for example with Taraweeh prayers. Taraweeh prayers did not occur during the time of the propet, per se. It was a good Bidi'a in the sense that they prayed during Ramadan, and then the prophet didn't show up the next day. Everyone was worried and they knocked on his door, and they said well you can pray Taraweeh on your own or you can pray it with Jama'a. And if you pray it within Jama'a then well, that's good, but you can pray it on your own.

PLW: This was during the lifetime of the prophet? After the lifetime of the prophet, it becames more problematic, almost synonymous with sin or heresy.That's why you need the Shi'ite ideas of the Noor Mohamed, something that shines through the consciousness of the collectivity — Messiah as collective — the radical view of certain Shi'ites. This could all be done, but the power points for it just don't exist, apparently.

AP: With regards to Shi'ite Islam, and the political apect and the concept of the Khalifa or the hidden Imam (Mehdi).

PLW: Corbin points out you have this hyper-authoritarian structure, based even on blood, but suddenly it flips into esotericism and you can talk about the Imam of one's own being. That's how you do that. Then you combine that with Sunni 'democracy' and come up with an interesting model. Then it's not just ethical culture for Muslims.



we could talk about ways in which we could try to live without it. And that's something else again, and we come up against this apparent impossibility of Luddism.

AP: With the idea of, well can we return to this idea of Luddism and exodus to me are similar concepts, withdrawal, but a lot of the 60s stuff was very extreme, I mean we're all gonna have a commune and live in the same room, and then we're all gonna have social issues because we're all gonna screw each other..

PLW: I can tell ya, I was there and it was awful. (laughs)

AP: I feel like it broke up a lot of social bonds. The fighting, and it all went to hell. There was no respect for people's autonomy and the need for autonomy.

PLW: And hard drugs and political reaction just came down all at once. We lost, too. It was like a war and we lost.

AP: In any sort of redux, that would be different ideas.

PLW: That's why I'm sort of fascinated by the Amish at the moment, maybe when I look into it more deeply I won't be, or I might be more so. Because they don't all live in the same room, you know what I'm saying? They maintain their individual households and they have economic co-operation across the village. But they're also got this incredibly tight religion that's holding it all together. And that's what we don't have, we don't have a belief system for which people are ready to sacrifice, apparently. We have our mental image of anarchism, but we don't have anything of it in our lives except maybe style. Which is not nothing, but still.

AP: What about the opening of not just style, the opening of anarchism so it's less dogmatic about religion, so that we can have Jewish anarchists, Christian anarchists, Muslim anarchists, and everyone doin their own thing like they do now…

PLW: Bring it on. Do you know how to do it, because I don't.

AP: Well there are a lot of Catholic anarchists now.

PLW: There are four or five of them, yeah. (laughs)

AP: There are a couple people talking about orthodox anarchism. There are some people starting to talk about Islam and anarchism in

computer. I would have to be there if I hadn't given up to a certain extent.

AP: You have mediators, too.

PLW: If I have to buy a rare book, I have to get somebody to go online for me now, because they don't have the book search services anymore in the back of the newspaper.

AP: They all went online.

PLW: There used to be book search services and they used to be quite good, it's a lie you couldn't find good books before the internet. And it's a lie that the internet's the only way you could have found me. If there were no internet, you would have read books and written to the publisher. That would have taken longer, but big deal. It's the whole effeciency argument all over again. The longer it takes, the more real it becomes too, that's also to be taken into consideration. And essentially what you've got here is a brutal physical reality with a bunch of people alone in their rooms in front of screens and there's no getting away from this physical model. Interactivity is not communitas, to use Paul Goodman's term.

AP: Computer labs are a prime example of that.

PLW: I see them, up at the school, they're all staring at the screen, they're not communicating.

AP: In a lecture hall there's not even communication with the professor anymore. There's no eye contact, they don't listen, they're completely transcribing. When you transcribe, you don't listen. I know because I transcribe. (Transcriber's note: I'm listening!)

PLW: The whole idea of being in a public space with other people now is problematic. Everyone's coming to it with their heads stuffed full of these images. They're not actually in the room, you know. It's bizarre sometimes as someone who does public speaking to experience this.

AP: One of the things I see as an issue is that, I agree, but pragmatically a part of me's like…

PLW: You need it. It's need. But face the fact that it's need and not some pleasure. That's as far as I would ask anyone to go here. Now



# Part 2 of 2: The Economics of Autonomous Zones

## Ego and Invisibility

AP: You were talking about no-go zones, Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ) and Semi-Permanent Autonomous Zones (SPAZ). I'm wondering about issues of visibility and invisibility. What would allow for a semi-permanent autonomous zone to exist as long as possible, without attracting attention. You've been talking about the media, one of the major beacons of attention. I'd use the metaphor of mosquitoes, when you go into the woods mosquitoes are attracted to you, they can sense your pulse and your carbon dioxide, and they will come and find you. It doesn't matter where you are, a mosquito will always find you because you are a human being letting off these specific things. As a semi-permanent autonomous zone, you want to be able to exist and do what you want to do, but at the same time you want to try and avoid issuing a certain scent. I'm not even sure exactly what that is, and I'm wondering if you have some insight on that.

HB: Well style is a big problem here. I hate the term lifestyle, but let's talk about style, since style is the human, the individual, as well as the movement. You try to have one of these, as you call them semi-permanent autonomous zones in a style which draws mosquitoes, or worse, then you are working under a handicap. I wrote this piece in *Fifth Estate* about an imaginary situation that seemed to me feasible in reality now. Briefly, it involved a kind of social camouflage in a rural county where the population is very low and you can actually take over the municipal government. So I invented a sheriff who quotes Guy Debord, and stuff like that. Basically what they try to do is not draw down the heat, so everyone kind of looks like crappy rural America. They've kept the shell as much as possible, and they don't encourage lifestyle tourists to

come and take part in what they're doing. In fact, they're funding it in various illegal ways. These are all things based on stuff I've heard about going on all already, except I put them all together. On the non-dramatically illegal front I heard about a ghost-town out West that people have sort of settled, and there's no municipal government there at all, they're just there doing all kinds of horrible zoning violations they want to do (laughs).

We can also talk about the periodical autonomous zones, like Burning Man and the Rainbow Gatherings which do have a lot of style and therefore have to keep on the move in certain ways. I know Burning Man always happens in the same place but that's because they found the one fucking place in America that nobody else wants! (laughs) A brilliant move, actually. And even they can only do it periodically.

AP: Is there something that happens when you try and stake a claim, or say that this is your space? I felt like that's also something that lights a blaze of fury on the part of the state form. That should be avoided somehow, I guess…

HB: You don't want to go around saying this is now the anarchist liberated zone…

AP: But people want to also take pride in that area, but you have to keep it from going out.

HB: Well what I miss here in this equation is, where are all the fucking co-operatives? I saw them all disappear in the 70s, and we talked about it in New York anarchist circles and basically came to the conclusion that capitalism had destroyed this movement with unfair competition.

AP: Or co-opting the co-operatives… We know a co-operative that is currently in the process of moving away from its political foundations, and that seems to be something that always happens.

PLW: That's why I always say, capitalism creates real needs. These people, I'm sure they're not doing it because they suddenly became evil. It's like people in my building in New York, it used to be a tenant co-operative and now it's going to become a regu-



AP: What do you think about that though, the problem of not being able to talk about anything, which does prevent the spread. I mean, I am very critical of the internet, but I think there are uses for it in a sense. One is the decentralized spread of ideas, like memes, things that people do. On the ground the lag is so much longer. One of the major reasons I use it is to do that, politically.

PLW: Well like they say, it's a mile wide and an inch deep. You could get widepsread, but you don't have the follow-through, you don't have the depth, because — and this is brutally simple to me, it's stupid stuff — because you don't have physical presence. Real communication is done with the whole body, in space.

AP: But the fact that I can send you an entire book and you can go print it off and go read it, this is the only thing the internet is good for. You know, this is an interesting sort of medium of sending text and it costs a lot less money.

PLW: You've gotta realize, though, that the sociology of this is the reification of technology, that it becomes diabolic or Mammonian. So it's this constant retreat, our strategy needs to be based on some sort of continual tactical retreat in which you can consistently refuse to be appropriated over and over again and it's not a natural way to live. As a strategy it has its problems.

AP: I have another question, and I hate to harp on it, but I want to see if you can think specifically about the internet. One of the things is, we would never have found you and would not be having this conversation right now without the internet. So to me, I do write about people not having the internet, even though there are social centres in bigger cities where people can go into internet rooms, or libraries, most of the homeless people in Canada that I know are on the internet because they all go to the library to use it, so I mean, there are some uses for it but there are…

PLW: There are uses for the car. In fact, there's a need, because capital creates need. It makes it impossible to function now, without the computer. So it's not a question whether it's a good thing or not, you need it. It's only because I've given up that I don't have a

other, they didn't know eachother they just knew what to look for. From 1964–1968 is the classical period when that moment of co-optation had not really occurred. After 68 then that becomes problematic. And the gap between a movement on the street and its recuperation by capital gets shorter and shorter until there is no gap, and you have capital dictating what happens on the street. And that began, I think, around 1995, just to pick a magic date.

AP: But smashing windows, breaking physical capitalist icons, it seems, it still seems, that there's nothing that can be done with it.

PLW: It doesn't go anywhere. As a tactic. You're criticizing it as a tactic?

AP: I'm not criticizing it as a tactic. I know it has serious limitations. But at the same time, this rebounding transmutation of its symbol, and being able to sell it back, the potential is not there for that.

PLW: I see the whole struggle as the mystery of how to avoid that. It is totally a mystery.

AP: One of the things I saw was property destruction.

PLW: That's one way to avoid it. (laughs)

AP: Like Earth First! can't be sold. If they did, everyone would be goin out breakin stuff, and that doesn't work either.

PLW: That sort of does. Look at Halloween, for example. They're got this lovely dialectic between destructive chaos and the most expensive, now, Hallmark events of the year.

AP: They have to have limits on it, though, it's toilet paper, it's shit you can't get in that much trouble for.

PLW: No no, but it makes them uneasy. We do have a certain gap between the state and the corporation here. And maybe this is an area we could play in. The values of the state are not always the same as the values of the corporation. Looked at from the big picture, viewed from outer space, yes. But viewed up close, no. So maybe there are tactical advantages to be sought there, and it would be better if we didn't talk about them.



lar capitalist-type co-operative, and we're going to own our apartments. It's not that people became evil, it's that they need to. Capitalism created the need.

AP: What's the flaw? There's got to be a flaw in this model.

PLW: Ivan Illich used to always talk about voluntary poverty, the actual need for asceticism. You actually have to face the fact that sacrifice is going to be involved here, and that is something that most Americans are not equipped to deal with. It's impossible to go around copping moralistic stances and telling them that they ought to, because we're talking about people who are hanging on to an economy by their fingernails. Give up your car, give up your computer, and they ask you if you're asking them to starve to death. And in fact that is what you're asking them to do.

AP: Is there anyway to do that?

## The Untouchables: Thoughts on Failure

PLW: Only by organizing. There are, after all, certain economic forms which are permitted to inch along in capitalism so long as they don't get to be too successful. Look at the Amish, they're allowed to do what they do.

AP: These are the untouchables.

PLW: They have a religious argument. Even anarchists could do this if they could swallow their traditional distaste for religious self-identifications. A food co-op is not illegal, we still have one in this county, craft co-operatives are not illegal.

AP: What can you do to salvage co-ops that have gotten to that stage? That have dilapidated? Is there anything you can do?

PLW: I wish I knew. You can't talk to these people about socialism anymore, anarchism is always difficult outside of urban bohemias…

AP: But if it has a responsibility, if the co-op was founded by the community and has a responsibility towards the community and it's not fulfilling those responsibilities, is there a way in which a community could…

PLW: It's going to involve sacrifice. It's going to involve some economic reversion. Reverting to earlier models. It's something human societies have done over and over again, it's not something I'm dreaming about, there are anthropologists who say there are no pristine hunter-gatherer societies in the world, they all reverted to that from some form of herding nomadism or primitive agriculture. I don't know if that argument is true, but I'm certainly willing to believe that some human societies have done that, have reverted to earlier economic models because they found the ones that they were using either unfulfilling or morally abhorrent, or both. I think we're in a position now where people feel the moral abhorrence but they can't see the efficiency argument. They can't see that there are certain kinds of values higher than effeciency. The left has been terrible in this regard historically, the left is always badgering about how more fucking effecient it's going to be when they take over. And how capitalism wastes this, and wastes that. Fuck it; effeciency is the problem, not the solution. In order to voluntarily embrace ineffeciency it means coming down in a number of bloody gadgets you've got surrouning you. I'm desperately disappointed by the fact that the neo-primitivist action groups in America all have website addresses and don't even have fuckin snail mail addresses. I can't even get in touch with them because they're online and I'm not, and these are fuckin neo-primitivists. Zerzanistas, and people like that. Everyone's got an SUV, everyone's got a cell phone, and everyone's got a computer above all, and I remember when *Fifth Estate* got their computers. What are you gonna do? You can't put out a magazine without computers. There was a Luddite guy in Pennsylvania was putting out a magazine on Luddism; I don't know what printing technique he was using, but it was obviously too much work and he gave it up. People weren't paying him to do it.

AP: Do you believe in mixtures, though?

PLW: Mixed systems? Of course, you've gotta, you've got to compromise. You can't just say, we're going to be paleolithic socialists now.



tion. And that's what the internet is. The left in America is reduced to the point where, you start a website, you get a lot of people to come out on the street and wave some signs, and that's supposed to be a political triumph.

AP: I did think, for instance, with Seattle and Quebec… I was in Quebec… one thing, the only thing they couldn't… 'they' in the 'wrong' sense…

PLW: We!

AP: 'We,' the one thing we couldn't do to ourselves around the message was, broken windows and property destruction is very difficult to do anything about. When the authorities, the state really didn't like it, and it actually got a lot of people to migrate into different movement…

PLW: You're talking about black bloc tactics?

AP: But I'm not so much in a black bloc, a black bloc whatever, we could all be wearing pink, we could all look like businessmen, or do whatever we want. Breaking things, but not hurting people, is a signification you can't do anything with. It's a black hole. For instance, the GAP started, in a bunch of corporate forms, starting imitating a lot of counter-cultural stuff in the late 90s and turn of the millenium, and feeding it back to us. The hipster shit, the same shit that's gone on forever and ever right…

PLW: Well no, actually.

AP: You don't think in the 60s it was the same sort of thing?

PLW: That's when it started.

AP: OK. That's my concession forever.

PLW: There was a time before that. It didn't last very long, it lasted about 4 or 5 years, when there was a social movement that was creating its own pleasure.

AP: You mean the beats?

PLW: No, they were a literary avant-garde, they weren't a movement. In the 60s there was this movement, sometimes called hippies but it would be better to think of a broader, vaguer term, because it was really a social movement. It wasn't based on knowing each

to face, I mean sure. We know all about the young dumpster divers and I think that's great.

## Recuperating the Rhizome

AP: What's the potential for the activist strategy? Do you feel like it has a larger potential, not so much in a centralized way, but as a decentralized, rhizomatic reality?

PLW: The problem is that this 'rhizome' has now become the internet. This is the problem. This is why we must move on from the Deleuze and Guatarri model, I'm afraid.

AP: OK. What are your feelings on that specifically?

PLW: I think that the problem is, we mistook the internet for the rhizome. And what we've got now is a situation where we're all hostages in cyberspace. We're all held hostage in cyberspace, which is basically a haunted slum. It's the perfect mirror of capital. This is one of the reasons there's not a lot of money generate out of the internet but a lot of money goes around it and through it and in it, because it's not capitalism per se but it's a mirror of capital. Therefore its reverse and in some sense its image. So we're all sucked into this, and every radical group in America is essentially a website and nothing more.

AP: I've been thinking about it and this is the first time I've heard it thought about in this way, but if you think about the internet as a mirror of capitalism, then it's like if you're looking at a mirror in this room, on that wall, then it's this space where, you can't actually walk into the mirror so it isn't capitalism. But it's there.

PLW: It's virtually there.

AP: This goes back to the idea of spaces, the idea of looking into the mirror as the only time you can see all the way around you. So it changes the space.

PLW: Global perspective. Sure, and the breakdown of the border, which postmodern capitalism just loves, just eats it up. We're talking about global capital, well it's got to have global communica-



AP: Because I'm not so much into that but I really am into having SPAZs, having spaces that are open, but I think if we have a computer I'm not going to toss it against the wall or hack it up with an axe just because it is.

PLW: No but, it has to be understood that there is such a thing as technological determinism. You use certain economies and technologies, and I don't want to be a vulgar Marxist here or a vulgar determinist of any sort, but you use certain things and they shape consciousness. Then consciousness shapes them and they shape consciousness and it's this complex feedback thing. You can not use certain technologies and expect certain social forms to emerge from them. This is what the Amish have discovered. They compromise, they'll have one car in the village, one phone in the village for emergencies. They're not puritans in that sense, maybe some of them are, since I know there are many different approaches. Just before you guys came in I was making some notes about research I would like to do about the Amish. But they are Luddites, in the sense that Luddism is about resisting technology which is hurtful to the commonality, which is the phrase that was used in one of the original Ludd letters, back in 1810s or whenever it was. Hurtful to the commonality, what technology will destroy community, and what technology will preserve community or even enhance it. And that's the sole basis on which they make their choices. So having one telephone in the village won't destroy the community. But internal combustion, that's a hard one. Electricity, that's a hard one. That's why they say that compressed air is Amish electricity. So they found a weird little compromise.

AP: They do steam, right?

PLW: I'm not sure if steam is permissible. Steam technology was clearly disruptive to the community and in fact, it was the technology the original Luddites were, you know what I'm saying? So steam itself is already on the road to social disintegration. But maybe now since it's a backwards step you could take it with some advantage. It would be interested to try and do a steam-based Lud-

dism. The unfortunate fact of the matter is, there is no Luddism going on, because it takes a community. I did research this recently, I got in touch with Kirkpatrick Sale, who did that book on Luddism and was involved in a little swish of Luddite revivalism that happened around the late 90s. And I asked him if he knew of any secular Luddite communities, and he said no. And if he doesn't know, then I guess it doesn't exist. He got me involved in the Vermont secession movement, because he said that's at least something we could do. I'm not sure how that's going…

AP: One thing about co-operatives, is a lot of them are aesthetic. A lot of people meet there and become group spaces, which is important. But in the co-operative sense there's a need for like, plumbers, electricians, things that actually make enough money that money can be put back in to do things.

PLW: I constantly think about it. I've been thinking about possible models, about William Mars and the printing co-operative concept. Whether you could take advantage that non-computer printed books, fine printing of some sort, I know it's an elitist thing of course, but could be the mainstay for a small community. Or a CSA. This is big in the country, with an organic farmer taking subscriptions and you buy your food at the beginning of the season. There's a co-operative element, you do some work to pay for your groceries, and you get your groceries during the system. It's within the capitalist frame, not a co-op, but it's getting closer to a co-op and could be an aspect of a new co-operative movement. But you know, I talk to people up here who are involved in ecological this, and solar that, and green the other, and they don't have any fucking idea about economics. It's all reformism. It's like "Oh, if we could just have hydrogen cars." Cmon, we would still have every single problem related to the automobile except we wouldn't be choking to death on the pollutants.

AP: A lot of co-operatives now, they profit from bourgeois culture. I mean, we can make a lot of money from that sector. They do



like a lot of aesthetic crafts and stuff it's possible to make money from.

PLW: That's quite true and I don't think you have to cut your nose off to spite your face here too much. Obviously, there's a fine line you find yourself crossing that you never noticed. I think of this in terms of the arts, for example. What are you supposed to do as an artist? Writers have already given up, there's no money in it, but what about painters and musicians? Success means that you're basically turning out commodities for capitalism. If you happen to have a nice lifestyle, then good. But there's certainly no such thing as an avart-garde movement that's bringing artists together in some kind of resistance. Everyone is on their own now. Good work is being done and it's all very highly individualistic and if you succeed at it, basically you're sucked into the gallery world and that's it. Forget the suppression and realization of art. Forget the romantic revolution. Your part in that is now over: you have become a successful artist. And content has nothing to do with this, I'm afraid. It would be nice if content had something to do with it, but we know it doesn't. We know the capitalists are quite happy to buy radical social art and hang it in their banks, because they've done it over and over and over again. If there's a little bit of heat coming from a lowbrow like Giuliani or Jesse Helms every once in a while everybody gets excited an thinks we're still living in the 19th century and it's the struggle of the avant-gardist; it's bullshit man. None of that's left. There is no movement, there is no avant-garde. Either you succeed, or you fail. So recently I've been toying with the idea that failure is the last possible outside. And somehow or another we have to come to terms with failure.

AP: I feel quite often in North America, failure actually is not so bad. You can live pretty well as a failure.

PLW: In a society of rich garbage, failure is not necessarily a voluntary poverty option, even. It would be nice if it was part of it, so you're looking at it in a positive way. The difficulties you're going