At the most basic level, anarchism is fundamentally opposed to the existence of the state and the authority relations that the state codifies, legitimates, or represents. Although anarchism has been associated primarily with political and social movements of the nineteenth century, it has recently moved to the center of attention for both activists and theorists alike. Embracing domains beyond its time-honored focus on the state, contemporary anarchism constitutes a political culture manifesting itself in common forms of organization and political action, common ideological discourses, and common elements of material culture. Through it all, anarchism has retained its opposition to the presence of coercion and hierarchy in human affairs, its "negation of authority over anyone by anyone." 

In this essay, my aim is to explore one aspect of this political culture, namely, the theory and practice of "ontological anarchism"—a stance that regards anarchism less as a political program and more as an artistic practice. Drawing on the works of Hakim Bey, I examine ontological anarchism's principles as well as its critiques of other strains of political theory and practice. The focus will be on what problems ontological anarchism has confronted and on what apparent solutions it has offered. Tracing affinities between ontological anarchism and other energetic radicalisms, as well as addressing debates among various advocates for anarchism, I seek to understand the merits of the sort of ideological position that proclaims "the triumph of life over dogma."

Contemporary anarchists often express disdain for abstract or academic theory. As an action-based creed rather than an intellectual dogma, there is no shortage of people who can offer a definition or account of what anarchism is (and is not). It seems as though a person cannot be an anarchist without having to explain the nature of anarchism and of anarchists. Though there is no universal understanding of or single approach to anarchism, my aim here is not to forge one. Instead, my project rests upon the claim that, despite some distaste for academic theory among anarchists, there is nevertheless a significant role for reflexive thought. As Saul Newman notes, "Given the decline of Marxism as both a political and theoretical project—and given the desire for a politics that avoids statism, authoritarianism, class essentialism and economism—perhaps it is time to invoke the anarchist tradition, or at least reflect more seriously upon it as a radical political alternative." Indeed, the recent revival of anarchist theory and practice has spurred just such an effort to think seriously about this strain of thought.

The point is not to argue endlessly about revolutionary theory or describe the infinite details of life in utopia. It is, rather, to engage in or contemplate those political actions that will actually make a difference in the struggles against what appear to be overlapping networks of domination.

In what follows, I will first place Hakim Bey's ideas in the context of contemporary political thought. Once that context has been set, the goal will be to outline the core ideas that mark Bey's ontological anarchism and, then, to identify some major criticisms of it that have been advanced by others. In the final section, I will offer an assessment of Bey's project and his contributions to anarchist political thinking.

Context
In pursuit of a contemporary anti-authoritarian politics, the lives and concerns of anarchists have certainly been shaped by various political and intellectual forces. The movements in and around the New Left of the 1960s no doubt provided some stimulus for a revival of anarchist theory and practice, as did the new social movements that flourished thereafter. Quite naturally, as these forces confronted an increasingly postindustrial and global economy, thinkers loosely grouped together under the rubric of poststructuralist theory tried to make sense of these forms of resistance. The result was that, by the late 1990s, there was enough evidence to claim that a paradigm shift had occurred within the anarchist tradition.9 One facet of this paradigm shift has been the emergence of a postanarchist tendency among any number of thinkers and activists. As Benjamin Franks puts it, postanarchism emphasizes "a rejection of essentialism, a preference for randomness, fluidity, hybridity and a repudiation of vanguard tactics, which includes a critique of occidental assumptions in the framing of anarchism."10 Though the concept is variously understood, postanarchism might best be seen as an updated version or modification of anarchism rather than a wholesale rejection of its traditional concerns.11

However, as Jason Adams has noted, "it is not simply poststructuralism that is informing anarchism today, but in fact the reverse is and has certainly been the case as well, despite this having been largely ignored by almost everyone-until recently."12 Alan Antliff has shown that a number of relatively "new" poststructuralist themes (such as ideas concerning the sources of oppression, generative power, and positive freedom) were actually expressed by any number of "classical" anarchist thinkers.13 Nevertheless, one could persuasively argue that the changes in radical politics associated with both the New Left and Situationism, along with the changes in the intellectual milieu associated with poststructuralist theory, may well have occurred simultaneously.14 Regardless of the causal direction of influence, though, poststructuralist and anarchist thought clearly share any number of ideas and attitudes. Most notably, though, both schools of thought revel in an anti-authoritarian streak, in a fundamental opposition to all forms of domination.15

The critique of power, and its eventual unmasking, is certainly a meme common to both poststructuralism and anarchism. Yet, the very antiessentialism that makes poststructuralist thought so appealing carries within it a "theoretical impasse: if there is no uncontaminated point of departure from which power can be criticized or condemned, if there is no essential limit to the power one is resisting, then surely there can be no resistance against it."16 One problem for any version of anarchism, whether imbued with poststructuralist insights or not, is to find some means of transcending that paradox. The challenge for anarchism or any other radical politics is to find a point of leverage that can overthrow existing structures of domination, without also reviving those same structures—or worse, creating new and more insidious ones.

Even more to the point, poststructuralist theory focuses on the productive or creative aspects of power, the sort of power that occurs within and engenders a multiplicity of practices. In the hands of such theorists as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, political thinking and acting no longer occur on the large scale associated with narratives ending in a cataclysmic political and social event—"the Revolution." Instead, they occur on a small scale, over a variety of local domains and language games. In other words, poststructuralist politics is a micropolitics that recognizes the local and contingent nature of political life and calls "for social, personal, and
political experimentation, the expansion of situated freedom, the release of subjected discourses and genres, and the limitation and reorientation of the role of the intellectual."17

The advent of poststructuralist theory and politics has transformed anarchist politics. At one time, anarchists organized for action much as their labor, Marxist, and Communist comrades did. As they prepared for the general strike or the proletarian revolution, their focus was on building national, if not centralized, movements that could marshal enough power to capture control of the state apparatus. By contrast, today, "the bulk of ongoing anarchist praxis and discourse takes place on the micro level of face-to-face collectives and affinity groups, and the meso level of the local milieu or (mini-)network of anarchists in a particular locale, such as a town or city."18 Moreover, in light of general poststructuralist conceptions of power, anarchists and others have begun to use modes of opposition rooted more in culture and society than in strictly political or economic domains.19

In short, a different sort of radical activism has emerged. In November 1999, in Seattle, a diverse collection of activists coalesced to protest the meeting of the World Trade Organization, and without hierarchy or bureaucracy, "affinity groups organized a wide range of activities, including marches, human blockade chains, banner displays, street props and pavement theatre."20 Ever since, forms of protest associated with "radical youth mobilization" and the "anarchist travelling circus" have become key elements in the frame of today's emancipatory politics.21 Radical activists have developed these forms in the spirit of "an affinity for affinity, that is, for non-universalizing, non-hierarchical, non-coercive relationships based and [sic] mutual aid and shared ethical commitments."22

In such a context, one of the more intriguing theorists is Hakim Bey (the pseudonym sometimes taken by Peter Lamborn Wilson). In the last two decades, his provocative ideas about anarchism and art, culture and cyberspace, have become popular and influential "because, for many activists, old-style anarchism is hopelessly out of date and largely inadequate as a form of resistance. Consequently, a number of them have now begun to adopt a decentralised and temporary form of nomadic micro-politics based on alternative electronic networking, immediacy, and the regeneration of everyday life."23 Drawing on a virtually encyclopedic range of sources—from Stirner to Deleuze, Nietzsche to Situationism; from poetry to piracy, the Internet to Islam-Bey's theorizing "eschews essences and unities, and seeks out differences and pluralities. It revels in dislocation, disunity, and radical openings at the level of representations."24 At times asserting his affinity with anarchists of the past, yet at other times renouncing certain aspects of contemporary anarchist theory and practice, Bey is not easily pigeonholed—either as a traditional anarchist or as a postanarchist. Still, his overall perspective does seem to share much with the general tenor of poststructuralist thought. Even as he seeks to avoid ideological boxes, then, his anti-authoritarian political thought definitely "thrives on baroque paradox; it favors states of consciousness, emotion & aesthetics over all petrified ideologies & dogma; it embraces multitudes and relishes contradictions."25

Ontological Anarchism

Constructed out of a flurry of images, wordplay, and allusions, Bey's work encourages anarchists to abandon the old categories and approaches, the ideologies and movements of the past, to
embrace an attitude of thoroughgoing insurgency. His writings offer any number of names for this type of open-ended, hedonistic revolt-chaos, postanarchism anarchy, and Immediatism, to name but a few. Perhaps the most comprehensive label for the theory and actions of radically free spirits seeking radical freedom that Bey ever used is that of "ontological anarchism." In this section, we will explore the nature of Bey's anarchism by reviewing his thoughts on such matters as poetic terrorism, the temporary autonomous zone, and other manifestations of insurgency.

In many ways, the syncretic anarchist thought that Bey has advanced appears initially as a sort of artistic expressivism focused on encouraging a spirit of rebellion. John Moore describes this orientation as the limning of an "anarchist subjectivity" in which revolt appears "as a synonym for the immediate realisation of the creative or poetic imagination in everyday life. Anarchy, in short, remains a condition of embodied or lived poetry."26 As the anarchist lives poetry, such old-fashioned hobgoblins of leftist revolution as purity and consistency are set aside. The goal is to liberate the imagination through spontaneous acts of poetic terrorism and art sabotage, both of which fall into the domain of pranks or stunts designed to shock the intended audience out of its complacent stupor.

Bey gives any number of examples-going naked, convincing people that they have inherited a useless fortune, invoking a curse on a malign institution, among others. The idea is to perpetrate a con-not for money, but for bringing about change by altering people's consciousness.27 In a context of cultural hegemony and an almost willing subjection, Bey's conception of the emancipatory project is a common one. Similarly, in both poststructuralism and postanarchism, "one of the basic problems of contemporary politics is figuring out how to get more people in more places to overcome not only their desire to dominate others, but their own desire to be dominated as well."28

Following lines of thought developed by the Situationist International, Bey's aim is to use whatever tools are available to disrupt the routines of everyday life, to disrupt the normal course of business. As he puts it, we must "murder the IDEA-blow up the monument inside us" to stimulate a shiftin the balance of power; Bey sees this "sabotage of archetypes as the only practical insurrectionary tactic for the present."29 In today's world, words are vapid, and freedom of speech is a ho-hum affair. All that remains is the power of images; only images matter.30 Where the latest speech by a candidate or the latest book by a theorist may well pass by little recognized and even less remembered, nearly everyone grasps the immediate import of something like a wardrobe malfunction or a satirical cartoon.

Is there any difference between poetic terrorism and art sabotage? Referring to an action by the Yippies in the 1960s, Bey observes that to "throw money away at the Stock Exchange was pretty decent Poetic Terrorism-but to destroy the money would have been good Art Sabotage."31 Stressing the importance of play and the realization of desire, Bey's approach asks that one act here and now to undermine those aspects of life marked by hierarchy and domination, boredom and ugliness. Whether a given action constitutes poetic terrorism or art sabotage, the ontological goal of such alternative forms of protest is "the 'defamiliarisation' and breaking open of these routinised ways of life."32
As a result of such observations, references to Bey's work often appear among discussions about anarchist tactics. Richard Day, for example, first mentions Bey in the context of delineating an array of activist practices used against existing institutions. Among the "non-hegemonic tactics" identified were subversion through parody, impeding operations, and prefiguring and constructing alternative organizations. Subversion is an important tactic largely in that "the existing order is rooted in the control of social life and that the acceptance of certain attitudes, reinforced through structures of authority and obedience, makes up a state of intellectual imprisonment." Given this analysis, it is little wonder that contemporary anarchists have recovered insights initially promoted by the Situationists and revived by Bey. Caught in the web of desire, commodities, and mediation, the means of revolt would be provided by the détournement-subversive misappropriation of images, symbols, and artifacts-and by the creation of "situations"-occasions for unmediated, playful participation in life outside of the "spectacle."35

To be sure, Situationist tactics have been employed to playful effect by such groups as the Billboard Liberation Front and the Bread and Puppet Theater. Subversive détournement can also be seen in the work of Packard Jennings, an artist who, in addition to altering billboards, notably "shopdropped" an "anarchist action figure" at Target and Wal-Mart stores in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 2007 Christmas season. Another example might be the efforts of Heath Bunting, a London artist who "got everyone on his mailing list to dial the numbers of 20 phone booths in the [King’s Cross] station . . . and to strike up a conversation with commuters and passersby." Finally, one might point to the appearance of "six crude letter bombs" directed at Barclays Bank in 1994-one of many "provocations launched in the name of art" attributed by a reporter to the "resurgence in interest in the tactics and ideas of the Situationist movement" and to the publication of an unsigned manifesto (actually, one of Bey's works) in the Welsh magazine, Hoax.39

The broader framework for such efforts at cultural protest is a nonhegemonic approach to activism characteristic of anarchists who "seek radical change, but not through taking or influencing state power." Rather romantic and somewhat optimistic, such an orientation led Bey in the 1980s to conceive of the "temporary autonomous zone" (TAZ) as a compelling and useful "alternative to both Capital and Ideology"-as a third way between the liberal politics of the West and the socialist politics of the East. Designed to provide people with a strong sense of both autonomy and community, the concept of the TAZ reflected similar ideas concerning the importance of peak experiences, revolutionary fervor, and ludic carnival.

As Situationist-inspired students at the University of Strasbourg wrote in 1966, the proletarian revolution should be a festival, with play as its "ultimate principle" and with its only rules being "to live without dead time and to enjoy without restraints". Indeed, for Bey, "it is the festival (with its ZeroWork and 'promiscuity') that functions as the crucial insurrectionary praxis or principle of social mutability" and that serves "as resistance and as uprising, perhaps in a single form, in a single hour of pleasure-festival as the very meaning or deep inner structure of autonomy." One example of this approach can be found in the efforts of the Fare Dodgers' Liberation Front, who used festival (a "tube party" complete with balloons, silly string, cake, and music) to protest high subway fares. The Fare Dodgers certainly brought to the London
Underground "a sense of play and pleasure that is normally absent," and thereby, offered its riders "a taste of an alternate reality."44

In contrast to totalizing approaches that presume to have the answer to all of society's problems, Bey offers a brief for indeterminacy, ambiguity, and choice-in short, for a nonauthoritarian approach to social change. As a result, the TAZ becomes a revolutionary vehicle that "will release a hundred blooming flowers, a thousand, a million memes of resistance, of difference, on non-ordinary consciousness-the will to power as 'strangeness.'"45 Bey appears to develop the concept of the TAZ as yet another way of threading the discursive needle. If the Revolution is no longer a possible means (let alone an effective one) of defeating capital and ideology, what can be done to remain active on the side of the angels of liberation? How can the spirit of the uprising be tapped without risking violence, oppression, and martyrdom? Bey's answer, although he takes pains to stress that it is not the answer, comes initially in the form of the TAZ: "The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it."46

Although he is less preoccupied with it today, the concept of the TAZ remains the one most closely associated with Bey and his work. As a theorist, Bey recognizes that he did little more than acknowledge its existence: "The thing about the TAZ is I didn't invent it, I just gave it a name. I think it's a sociological reality that groups of people will come together to maximize some concept of freedom that they share as naturally as breathing."47 Their experiences in a TAZ, whether they last a few hours or a few years, inevitably give people a taste of the future. In Bey's conception, the TAZ foreshadows what another world might be like; it proves to us that another world is indeed possible. The TAZ permits rebellion in those interstices of social life where the state has yet to reach, those aspects of the lifeworld that the system has not yet colonized. It is less about creating the Revolution and more about inciting the excitement of continual insurrection.

Such a prescription for political action makes perfect sense in a postanarchist context because "Revolution is closed, but insurgency is open. For the time being we concentrate our force on temporary 'power surges,' avoiding all entanglements with 'permanent solutions.'"48 In other words, the TAZ constitutes a postmodern tactic of protest and prefiguration. It represents "an island of achieved social change, a place where the revolution has actually happened, if only for a few, if only for a short time."49

Years after propounding the theory of the TAZ, Bey shifted focus somewhat and started speaking of "Immediatism" to underscore the fleeting but meaningful aspects of the types of actions he envisions. Immediatist actions could take on any number of forms: "Some last no longer than a chance meeting between two kindred spirits who might enlarge each other by their brief and mysterious encounter; others are like holidays, still others like pirate utopias."50 Under the mantle of Immediatism, the main obstacle to liberation is resting primarily in the domain of consciousness and culture. In his eyes, "only the uprising against false consciousness in both ourselves and others will sweep away the technology of oppression & the poverty of the Spectacle."51 If commodity consumption and spectacle are equally forms of mediation, then the
goal of social and political change efforts should be to get outside that mediation through creating radically different modes of production and consumption.52

As a utopian ideal, this focus on the im-mEDIATE remains elusive. "Where and when is the world of unmediated creativity? If it can exist, it does exist—but perhaps only as a sort of alternate reality which we so far have learned not to perceive. Where would we look for the seeds—the weeds cracking through our sidewalks—from this other world into our world?"53 Our most common mistake is to look for them somewhere out there, to search for them as we might search for signs of extraterrestrial life. A more productive approach, Bey suggests, would be to seek signs in the here and now, to find the other world prefigured in the relationships we create through our present activity.

The tools of Immediatism thus permit one to go beyond the mediation and alienation found in modern life. Bey observes, for example, that an "obvious matrix for Immediatism is the party."54 He also cites games, shared meals, live music and dance, and even quilting bees as similar manifestations of this endeavor. No matter what specific form it might take, like a dinner party, Immediatism begins "with a group of friends trying not just to overcome isolation but also enhance each other's lives."55 As one moves outward and practices radical networking, the principles of affinity group formation necessarily govern social interaction. The eventual hope, of course, is that these interactions will serve as the basis for a new society, for new forms of relationships. Then again, perhaps one need not wait for the eventual realization of this hope. As Bey says: "We're not kidding or indulging in hyperbole when we insist that meeting-face-to-face is already 'the revolution'."56

Even so, in Immediatism, Bey presents an image of the revolutionary vehicle different from that of the TAZ—namely, Chinese secret societies, the tongs. He notes approvingly that William Burroughs had recommended it as a mode of organization for gays and lesbians, and Bey further recommends it "to all marginal groups, especially ones whose jouissance involves illegalism (potheads, sex heretics, insurrectionists) or extreme eccentricity (nudists, pagans, post-avant-garde artists, etc., etc.)."57 To an extent, advocacy of the tong seems to revert to the conspiratorial, revolutionary cells commonly associated with Bakunin. It also has the effect of making the practice of Immediatism appear more dangerous and alluring than quilting bees or dinner parties.

With the end of the Cold War, though, Bey offers yet another variation on the theme of the preferred vehicle for political activity. Originally put forward as a third way, an alternative to Capital and Revolution (or, as he has also put it, Capital and Ideology or even Capitalism and Communism), the TAZ and its emphasis on withdrawal and disappearance was Bey's first take on a revolutionary mechanism. He soon opted for the spirit of revolution in the context of the dawn of Immediatism, with its preference for carving out passionate, vibrant experiences of communion and community. With the apparent triumph of liberal capitalism amid "the end of history," though, the transformed world seems to have become one (rather than two or three). As a result, by the mid-1990s, Bey comes to the conclusion that "the revolutionary force in the single world of sameness has to be difference" itself.58 Such a revolution takes the form of political and personal struggles, of struggles against power and efforts to impose self control:
"Beyond the temporary autonomous zone, beyond the insurrection, there is the necessary revolution—the 'jihad.'"59

Mention of jihad, of course, highlights Bey's (that is, Wilson's) longstanding interest in and attraction for Islam. As an anarchist, he has found a source of political inspiration in many aspects of Islam. The concept of jihad, to be sure, is one among them. Yet his relation to any given religion is ambiguous, as is his relation to any particular strain of political thought. For example, after temporarily accepting the label of "spiritual anarchist" in a 2004 interview, Wilson soon states that he is not a practicing Muslim—though he has many friends and allies in the Sufimovement. Similarly, in a 2005 interview, when asked if he defines himself as a Muslim, he states that he practices Shia Islam—but only after noting that "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."60 Still, Wilson approvingly cites Sufism for its emphasis on direct or immediate experience as a means for gaining wisdom.61 Sufism is also attractive insofar as it stresses themes of universalism and radical tolerance. With people encouraged to find their own way, to seek their own paths, the kind of Islam that Bey embraces naturally is one consistent with his pronounced anti-authoritarian streak. As he put it, "It's freedom on every level that I'm interested in, not just freedom in the assembly."62

In the final analysis, regardless of the framework adopted, no single course of political action can be recommended definitively. This is particularly true in today's post-Cold War context, wherein our work for good causes has no revolutionary consciousness or guiding myth, even as any illegal activity lacks both consciousness and results.63 The TAZ may be useful from time to time, but its position as a third way is no longer convincing when two worlds have been reduced to one—the world of triumphant global capital. Though cyberspace initially offered some promise as a rhizomatic form of resistance, today it represents little more than a black hole wherein "every radical group in America is essentially a website and nothing more."64 With real communication and authentic community lacking, there can be no practical follow-through and no building of alternative institutions. As a result, the anti-authoritarian movement fails to cohere. It lacks a common spirit, perhaps even a common spirituality, and therefore, easily gets overwhelmed by the forces of cultural hegemony.

Ultimately, the question of what to do must be left up to those who will actually do it. Whatever form of action he may recommend, though, Bey is drawing on themes long found in anarchist and related schools of thought. Consistently opposed to both the Revolution and the Spectacle, Bey in his early work made the case for a "psychic nomadism" and for liberation via acts of aesthetico-political autonomy. Concepts such as play, networking, potlatch, and festival have all appeared time and again in his writings. Denying any overtly political intent or instructional purpose, ideas related to expressivism (art, imagination, immediacy, and experience) percolate throughout Bey's work. After his early enthusiasm for poetic terrorism and TAZ, though, he speaks more recently of "melancholic freedom" and "shattered relics of resistance."65 Following Nietzsche in opting for "pure expression" rather than consciousness, we should not be surprised that Bey has come to see his own project to be much like all others—one that "(as Nietzsche says) can only be 'founded on nothing.'"66

Critiques
This bit of ironic modesty has been lost on Bey's critics, though, for they have found plenty of material for quarrel. Anarchists who favor traditional forms of social and political organizing have found Bey's writings to offer too much individualism and hedonism. Other anarchists who focus on the tactical issues involved in direct action have suggested that the TAZ is a problematic course of action, despite whatever initial appeal it may have had. Still others offer a negative assessment of Bey's overall perspective, having come to view his politics as ultimately conservative in its implications.

In the eyes of Murray Bookchin, for example, there are serious problems with Bey's ideas. His work, along with that of George Bradford and John Zerzan, is seen by Bookchin as prototypical of a "lifestyle anarchism" that stands in contrast to the more traditionally radical, social anarchism.67 To be sure, the theorists who attracted Bookchin's attention do not always agree. Indeed, other than being a name for people with whom Bookchin disagrees, as Bob Black asserts, there may not even be any such school of thought.68 Regardless, Bookchin offers a critique of both postanarchism and primitivism, which asserts that these latest variants of anarchism are too individualistic and too personalistic to offer an effective counter to capitalism and its attendant ills. For Bookchin, the approach taken by the "lifestyle anarchists" prefers hedonistic postures--"spray-can graffiti, postmodernist nihilism, antirationalism, neoprimitivism, anti-technologism, neo-Situationist 'cultural terrorism,' mysticism, and . . . Foucauldian 'personal insurrections'"--rather than critical social analysis.69 Bookchin is not alone in finding Bey's ontological anarchism to be excessively individualistic. Seán Sheehan, for example, finds that it generally produces "a mere politics of style, the kind . . . that celebrates fragmentation, plurality and difference while conveniently putting to one side questions of class exploitation."70

To be sure, the proponents of a cultural anarchism proclaim that political radicals in the leftist mode produce either a stilted sort of revolution (boring, ineffectual protest) or no revolution at all (with the reassertion of domination). For instance, Bey and others seem to advocate jettisoning the collectivist, leftist heritage of anarchism that has been handed down since the nineteenth century. Not only are its main ideas outdated, Bey asserts, but its tactics simply do not fit the times. "Demos, picket-lines & reprints of 19th century classics don't add up to a vital, daring conspiracy of self-liberation."71 The concern political anarchists have with the cultural radicals runs suspiciously parallel: cultural radicals may bring a spirit of play to rebellion, but they can produce no real, institutional change as the dominant culture is endlessly malleable and adaptive. Even the most ostensibly radical cultural products and symbols will be rendered harmless through cooptation and commodification.72

Ultimately, Bookchin's critique of Bey and other "lifestyle anarchists" is largely framed by his take on the 1960s. In a manner similar to conservative and neoconservative cultural critics—a similarity also noticed by Black—Bookchin faults the political activists of the 1960s for being sectarian and bourgeois, emphasizing theater, and playing at violent revolution.73 Sixties radicals, including many anarchists, were averse to theory, irrational, and cynical; they were so anti-American that they alienated the very people they needed to reach. Like those radicals of the past, today's "lifestyle anarchists" emphasize spontaneous acts of rebellion. Yet for Bookchin, the problem is that spontaneity uninformed by theory "only produces more events, such as the 1960s countercultural explosions-riots, street theater, and squats that quickly die down and have no lasting effect upon society."74 In the end, the failures of sixties radicals must be traced both
to their lack of a relevant and persuasive social theory and to their unwillingness to establish a responsible and structured organization.75

Another important criticism of Bey's work has been leveled against his views regarding how best to structure both political and cultural resistance. Bey, like many anarchists today, legitimately opposed any theory of a revolutionary vanguard, but even the most committed advocate for spontaneity has to have in mind some alternative strategy to guide resistance and change. Under the influence of Deleuze and Guattari, Bey settled on "a nomadic agent of change: one that can disappear, who is not bound by place, or past experiences."76 The problem with this approach is that economically independent subjects may well be the only ones capable of mixing nomadic drifting with political action. Such autonomous egoists (acting in modes sketched by Stirner or Nietzsche) will have little in common with ordinary people (the unenlightened masses) and will likely constitute themselves as a group apart. Though Bey insists that his nomads (practicing disappearance and refusal) are "not an avant-garde and that there is no avant-garde," one can easily foresee how such a group might find itself in the position of one.77 It is but a short step from viewing oneself or being seen as different to considering oneself or being hailed as special, if not sanctified.

Much of the criticism directed at Bey on this front is less concerned with the potential for nomads to become vanguards than with the likely effectiveness of the TAZ. Although the TAZ partakes of the anti-authoritarian, liberatory spirit of anarchism, Benjamin Franks has significant concerns about it because the TAZ hides (or even flees) from, rather than directly confronts, oppressive apparatuses.78 Born of the poststructuralist preference for cultural or symbolic resistance, the TAZ operates in the interstices and gaps within the system's structures of domination. Reflecting Bey's partiality for rhizomatic and nomadic approaches, his theory of the TAZ fails to challenge authority directly—rather than advocating physical battles with police, it recommends basking in a fleeting moment of festival freedom. To Franks, this approach privileges a vanguard of liberal moral agents who all too readily emphasize their autonomy, their intermittent social obligations, rather than collective action or communal solidarity.

Similarly, Bookchin has criticized the TAZ by likening it to a momentary, Warholesque happening: "a fleeting expression of the 'will to power' that is, in fact, conspicuously powerless in its capacity to leave any imprint on the individual's personality, subjectivity, and even self-formation, still less on shaping events and reality."79 Averse to both theory and organization, Bey's approach to revolutionary practice is thus seen as bourgeois, decadent, narcissistic, and indulgent. In Bey's hands, Bookchin believes, anarchism "takes flight from all meaningful social activism and a steadfast commitment to lasting and creative projects by dissolving itself into kicks, postmodernist nihilism, and a dizzying Nietzschean sense of elitist superiority."80 Contemporary anarchism, rooted in doctrines of personal resistance and chic rebellion, is fundamentally ineffective. The capitalist system, Bookchin asserts, cannot "be overthrown by the creation of Temporary Autonomous Zones, or by 'closing' down a government or commercial center for a few hours or even a day, or by routine tussles with the police, or by having a street festival with black flags draped from lampposts."81

Another set of criticisms comes from John Armitage, who was initially drawn to Bey's work as a guiding light for cybertheory and cyberactivism.82 Yet, as he explored it further, Armitage found
a number of problems with Bey's approach to political change—problems that led him to conclude that Bey's thought had conservative implications. Obscurantist in its presentation and elitist in its tone, Bey offers little more than "an individualistic refusal of the mediated image of the state; the state as 'spectacle,' the state as 'simulation,' the state as personified by 'Cop culture' on the television screen."83 The problem with contemporary culture is not its mediated or spectacular images; the problem is globally concentrated ownership of the means of production in the domains of media, information, and technology. Thus, Bey neglects the social effects of material capital (as opposed to the "sign of capital") and ignores the role of social class in political action. High-tech struggles against the military-industrial complex and global finance capital cannot be "theorised, organised, and realised without the participation of the new class-based movements of workers, women, anti-racists, greens, peace activists, and so on."84 Armitage concludes: "Bey's work is, for the most part, not much more than situationism and autonomist Marxism shorn of their Marxian heritage."85 The way back from the brink, then, is to embrace a more explicit and thoroughgoing class-oriented framework.

In many respects, the critiques just reviewed seem to miss the point. The return to Stirner and Situationism that Bey sparked occurred precisely because radicals in the 1960s, whether in the United States or in Europe, failed to bring about a lasting revolution. The search for post-Marxist understandings of social change, advanced by Bey and many others, arose because class-based organizations themselves had limited success in combating either the global influence of the military-industrial complex and finance capital or the intertwined, multiple axes of domination exposed by the new social movements. Whether they appear as spontaneous acts of rebellion or as revolutionary dinner parties, the actions recommended by Bey seem as effective as any other in raising consciousness. That is to say, they are no more and no less likely to produce a vanguard of avant-garde, insurgent artists than any more overtly insurrectionist or institutionalist approach.

By the time the second edition of T.A.Z. appeared in 2003, though, Bey's conceptions of political and cultural change had been modified—perhaps in response to such criticisms, perhaps not. Bey's earlier formulations seem dated and time-bound, he acknowledged; they were as momentary as a TAZ itself. Still, he noted that they also remained useful or even essential to the overarching task of resistance; thus, "the Temporary Autonomous Zone appears not just as an historical moment, but also a psychospiritual state or even existenti"al condition."86 People yearn for peak experiences of many sorts, to be sure, but politically, they need such opportunities as the TAZ or its variants provide to sample the autonomous life. It may well be the only means for them to create either the psychic space or the political outside necessary for resistance.

Bey now acknowledges, however, that the path of rhizomatic resistance on which he staked so much has had mixed results. The pervasive focus on tactics, which seemed bent on promoting an anarchist lifestyle, overlooked the need for strategic thinking. The positioning of ontological anarchism as a third way between capital and revolution, between ideology and insurrection, ran aground as the vibrancy of alternatives dissipated with the end of the Cold War, the consequent triumph of capital, and the persistence of hegemonic imagery. Creating zones of autonomy must now take a back seat to economic organizing (establishing alternative institutions) and "entrism" (having anarchists join other movements).87 These observations by Bey seem to be tacit recognition that the concerns of Bookchin and Franks ultimately had some merit.
In the end, whether or not one accepts the critiques at face value, it seems nearly impossible to choose between the positions of leftist anarchism and ontological anarchism. Both strains of thought are important parts of the tradition. As Dave Morland observes, anarchists share "a double-barreled conception of human nature" in which people are marked by both sociability and egoism.88 As a result, today's anarchists likely opt for theoretical openness and skepticism. It is not clear, however, whether this stance signifies that anarchism is fundamentally incoherent or that sectarianism hopelessly divides the movement.

Assessment

As a worldview, anarchism cannot be restricted to either a cultural milieu or an individual lifestyle; it mandates neither formal membership in an organization nor a willingness to discuss abstract ideas. For anarchists, as the first issue of the Vancouver-based Open Road proclaimed in 1976, "theories and abstractions must be tested in concrete practice," and therefore, anarchist journals often "are more concerned with reporting on what people and organizations are doing than what they talk about doing."89 Most anarchists agree that the focus should be on that "practical activity which in whatever small way helps to increase mutual aid, destroy capitalism and bring about libertarian communism."90 As a result, typical conversations with anarchists often focus on the particular causes and actions they are pursuing at any given time.91 Any coherent assessment of ontological anarchism, then, has to judge not only its theoretical and polemical dimensions, but also its practical and activist ones.

As anarchism has adopted poststructuralist insights and adapted to political and economic forces such as globalization, it has transformed its approaches. With power taking on multiple, ever mutable forms, anarchists have taken old ideas about direct action and transformed them as well. Slogans developed in other contexts (such as "the personal is political" or "think globally, act locally") have found new resonance in the context of producing an authentically counter culture or constructing alternative institutions-communes, free schools, the co-op movement, growing networks of independent media outlets, and organizations such as Food Not Bombs.92 Prominent among the tactics used in this endeavor are the affinity group and the TAZ. In many ways, the nonhierarchical, consensus-based affinity group has become the primary model for anarchist organization, if only because it taps into the very spirit of autonomy and community that anarchists have long promoted. Though less structured than the affinity group model, the TAZ brings "people together in novel ways."93

Creating organizations on one's own, building one's own culture, certainly finds some support in the ideas found in Bey's works and elsewhere. Whether directly inspired by Bey or not, contemporary anarchists often focus on direct action not only to mark the do-it-yourself character of their political work, but also to indicate their intention to "be the change"-to prefigure the nonexclusive, nonhierarchical forms of social interaction that they would like to institutionalize. In doing so, they have found a clear alternative to both typical reformist efforts and traditional leftist struggles. Indeed, there is some evidence that such "recurring instances of revolt against established authority can often be more powerful and infectious than the more finalistic ideology of change embodied in traditional notions of revolution."94
In some respects, though, Bookchin was correct to note the divide between his "social anarchism" and others' "lifestyle anarchism" (including Bey's ontological anarchism)-whether or not the chasm between them is unbridgeable. The two tendencies in contemporary anarchism are most definitely at odds-partly because, like competing paradigms, they simply view the world in different ways. Where leftist or social anarchism wants to revive the socialist or communist core of the earlier anarchist tradition, lifestyle or ontological anarchism wants to bid goodbye to all that. Where social anarchists call for "rational theory and serious organization," ontological anarchists remain suspicious of those tropes because "as soon as 'the Revolution' triumphs and the State returns, the dream and the ideal are already betrayed."95 Where some see a duck, others see a rabbit.

At present, though, there appears to be no single effort likely to bridge the chasms in the anarchist movement. It is hard to envision any polemic that is likely to succeed in calling activists back to first principles or to get theorists to focus on practical actions. Both the allure and the frustrations of anarchism can be found in the observation that it "is more than just a political philosophy; it is a way of life that encompasses political, pragmatic, and personal aspects."96 Adherents to different strains of anarchism hold different world views; they inhabit different forms of life. Despite the resurgent interest in anarchism, the sheer diversity of approaches and the prevalence of factional conflicts make it difficult for any unified movement (even on a local level) to be sustained for very long-as the personal testimony of anarchists reveals time and again.97

One element that remains common to all forms of anarchism is a bedrock commitment to opposing authoritarian social relations. No matter their brand, Andrej Grubacic observes, anarchists "believe that human freedom and happiness would be best guaranteed by a society based on principles of self-organization, voluntary association, and mutual aid, and because we reject all forms of social relations based on systemic violence, such as the state or capitalism."98 Contemporary anarchism, of whatever type, also remains a theory of practice. Given poststructuralist insights into the diffuse and complex nature of social and political oppression, as well as economic and cultural domination, it seems that a focus on doing what one can, wherever one can, however one can may be the only means of making headway in our liberatory project. Putting these commitments together, it seems that many of today's anarchist movements are "less about seizing state power than about exposing, delegitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning ever-larger spaces of autonomy from it"-in other words, they adopt a position rather in sync with Bey's ideas.99

If the goal of political activity is simultaneously to delegitimize authority and to construct alternative institutions from below, it seems that the experimental and aesthetic spirit of ontological anarchism runs counter to any institutional intent. Efforts modeled on Bey's work appear instead to be focused on promoting "anarchy as culture, as a lived reality that pops up everywhere in new guises, adapts to different cultural climates, and should be extended and developed experimentally for its own sake."100 Rather than direct us unfailingly toward the new society of the future, the pirate-utopia-tocome, Bey's Immediatism opts for creating and experiencing it here and now.
What Hakim Bey brings to today's ideological mix is the product of dissatisfaction with both traditional leftist ideas and more recent primitivist tendencies. Drawing on a wide range of sources, he employs and amplifies elements of political, poetic, spiritual, and poststructuralist thought that are compatible with anarchism—for instance, themes such as affinity and autonomy, ontology and outlandishness, pleasure and possibility, religion and rebellion. What results is the syncretic (if not eclectic) approach that Bey labels "Ontological Anarchy" because it suggests that being itself remains in a state of 'divine Chaos,' of all-potentiality, of continual creation."101 His work, it seems, reproduces what Sheehan regards as "Nietzsche's subversive attack on the psychology of conformity, his life-affirming championing of the self's creative becoming, and the assault on notions of truth and reason at the expense of history and being"-positions that "are all warmly embraced in the spirit of individualism that infuses anarchism."102

Bey's thought takes the expansive form it does partly because it wants to remain unbounded and unlabeled and partly because it shares a poststructuralist reverence for excess or abundance.103 It is no wonder, then, that concepts like the TAZ invoke the entire range of anarchist tactics, whether "in the form of momentarily reclaimed streets, summit convergences or occupations to block environmental destruction."104 Because of their expansive reach, the TAZ and Bey's other concepts often appear as empty signifiers-concepts so overcoded with a multiplicity of meanings that they tend toward emptiness.105 They are so pliable as to permit a variety of ideological tendencies, movements, and subjects (whether anarchist or otherwise) to claim affinity both for and within them. Many such signifiers exist in political discourse-"freedom," "the people," "green"-and it seems that concepts such as "temporary autonomous zone," "poetic terrorism," and "jihad" similarly serve that function in Bey's anarchist discourse. Given the range of movements and actions that anarchists undertake, it seems that "anarchy" itself (or, at least, an "anarchist ethics of resistance to authority") has also taken on the markings of an empty signifier.106 Indeed, if one echoes the frequent calls for the creation of a "movement of movements" or "new forms of universality," that is exactly what anarchism becomes.107 What else is this but a call for postanarchism to put in motion the logic of equivalence necessary to constitute one side in an agonistic, hegemonic conflict between the forces of autonomy and the forces of authority?

One should certainly not assert that Bey's approach is above hegemonic contestation, for in some respects, he can be just as sectarian as anyone else, drawing discursive lines between his own approach and those of others. For instance, in the "Communiques of the Association for Ontological Anarchy," Bey critiques the primitivist strain of contemporary anarchism. He professes no preference for the simple life of the peasant, no fondness for tribal culture, no desire for a return to the Stone Age: "We spurn knee-jerk anti-Tech anarchism... and we reject the concept of the Technological Fix as well."108 Still, he tries to thread the needle by also proclaiming that the ideal future would install a "psychic paleolithism based on High-Tech-post-agricultural, post-industrial, 'Zerowork,' nomadic (or 'Rootless Cosmopolitan')-a Quantum Paradigm Society."109

In other respects, Bey's approach to political action opts out of the agonistic sphere and moves toward a psychoanalytic one. The reformer expects that the government will respond to earnest appeals to change its policies; the leftist revolutionary reads deeply in Marxist theory and scrupulously organizes for the day when the Revolution seizes the reins of power from Capital.
The reformist and revolutionary perspectives both presume that the forces of domination will capitulate to our demands, in one way or another, at one time or another. No matter which path we choose, we fall into the same trap. If we traverse the fantasy, however, we can avoid the trap altogether—as "soon as they perceive that the real goal is the consistency of the ideological attitude itself, the effect is self-defeating." In other words, our political efforts should focus on "inventing responses that preclude the necessity of the demand and thereby break out of the loop." \[110\] 

The message of ontological anarchism, then, is that anarchists and other radicals should embrace a nonprogrammatic, yet antileftist approach to creating the new society. In part, this involves direct action efforts in which activists take charge and directly address immediate issues in their own communities, rather than promote governmental solutions to problems or await the revolutionary millennium. In part, the project of ontological anarchism means moving beyond ideological categories, beyond anarchism's Marxist or socialist roots, to borrow ideas and approaches from diverse sources. In short, Bey's overall contribution to political theory and praxis has been, I believe, to have revived a generalized spirit of revolt in the anarchist tradition—much like the Situationists before him. \[112\]

In the end, though, there is something missing in Bey's thought. Initially appealing, his rafting trip through the tributaries of anarchism leaves one with a sense of emptiness and lack after awhile. At times, Bey seems to have higher aspirations than mere self-expression; at others, he denounces the very idea of anything beyond a moment's play. Ontological anarchy, he proclaims, "wants no disciples—it would prefer to be burned-immolation not emulation! In fact it has almost no interest in 'dialogue' at all, and would prefer rather to attract co-conspirators than readers." \[113\] His Nietzschean call to arms is one that asks those co-conspirators to articulate abundance, to embrace excess, because "Chaos never died." \[114\] Perhaps, but then again, fulfillment never comes.

Repeatedly, anarchist thinkers such as Sheehan assert that a key problem for politics is, "why does desire apparently submit so readily to its own repression?" Bey's work represents yet another effort to derive the answer to that question—or at least, a means of halting so ready a submission. In the final analysis, what ultimately emerges from Bey's work is not so much a sense of hope, but a sense of limits. Usually hopeful of making trouble or sparking revolt, Bey ends one of his books with a self-indictment: "I accuse myself of ineffectualism, even futility. Not enough has changed. Perhaps nothing has changed." \[116\] In moving from Nietzsche to Lacan, Bey seems "a little too reliant upon what seems to be an ethos of fleeting, individualistic encounters." \[117\]

Bey leaves us with little more than the vague hope that some enlightenment is better than none. Perhaps that is all there is, because "we are faced with the monumental task of constructing an anti-Capitalist resistance movement out of the shattered remnants of radicalism, some glue, some tissue paper, & some hot rhetoric." \[118\] Even so, I do not believe that we are forever trapped in the static choreography of a hopeless struggle between weak liberatory forces and powerful, malleable forces of domination. To be sure, the prospects for ultimate liberation are dim—particularly if that struggle is conceived in the conventional manner, as occurring from an uncontaminated or fixed outside. As Saul Newman observes, most political projects have
attempted "to 'fill' or 'suture' this fundamental lack in society, to overcome its fundamental antagonism. But this is an impossibility: the Real of antagonism, which eludes representation, can never be overcome."119

Antagonism cannot be transcended. There will always be some line of conflict or other; as soon as one perceived problem or division appears to be resolved, another will take its place. As a result, my view approximates Stuart White's conclusion that "the practical role of the anarchist is not to build this unattainable dream, but to push the messy complexity of society in a more anarchist direction."120 In developing ontological anarchism, Hakim Bey seems to have arrived at this same realization. Even though the lack remains, there is still something to be said for preserving the utopian spirit (not the utopian dream) in and for itself. In this context, it is not at all surprising that he invokes Georges Sorel: "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."121 Though the myth of the general strike that Sorel advanced is not the one that will necessarily unify contemporary leftists, or even today's anarchists, its emergence provides what I think may be the key to understanding ontological anarchism.

In the course of his life as an anarchist thinker, Bey (both seriously and playfully) has recommended any number of tactics—from poetic terrorism to the temporary autonomous zone, from Immediatism to jihad, from revolutionary difference to "entrism." During that same trajectory, he has drawn inspiration from any number of thinkers—from the nineteenth century (Fourier and Nietzsche) to the twentieth (Debord and Deleuze), from the anarchist tradition (Stirner and Sorel) to the spiritual one (poetic or Islamic). No matter the concern of the moment, though, no matter which frame of reference he employs, Bey has remained ever focused on finding the very idea—the mythic concept or the cohesive spirit—that will make emancipation both conceivable and possible. Fortunately, for him and for us, we always have at our disposal a rich tradition of ideas that can be counterposed to any orthodoxy. Of that claim, the current revival of anarchist theory and praxis is evidence enough.

Footnote

NOTES


27. Bey, T.A.Z., 5-6.


29. Bey, T.A.Z., 33, emphasis in original.


31. Bey, T.A.Z., 12, emphasis in original.


34. Sheehan, Anarchism, 122.


41. Bey, T.A.Z., x.


44. Goaman and Dodson, "A Subversive Current?," 90-91.


49. Day, Gramsci Is Dead, 163, emphasis in original.


51. Bey, T.A.Z., 46.

52. Bey, Immediatism, 26.


54. Bey, Immediatism, 11.

55. Bey, Immediatism, 17.
56. Bey, Immediatism, 21, emphasis in original.

57. Bey, Immediatism, 13, emphasis in original.


59. Bey, "Millennium."

60. Bleyer, "An Anarchist in the Hudson Valley" and "Peter Lamborn Wilson Interview, Part 1

html (accessed May 2010).


63. Bey, "Millennium."

64. "Peter Lamborn Wilson Interview, Part 2 of 2: the Economics of Autonomous Zones,"

65. Bey, T.A.Z., xii.


67. Murray Bookchin, Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm

68. Black, Anarchy After Leftism, 13.

69. Bookchin, Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism, 19.

70. Sheehan, Anarchism, 138.


72. Sheehan, Anarchism, 143; Bookchin, Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism, 3.

73. Black, Anarchy After Leftism, 88.

74. Bookchin, Anarchism, Marxism, and the Future of the Left: Interviews and Essays, 1993-


77. Bey, T.A.Z., 129.


79. Bookchin, Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism, 24.

80. Bookchin, Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism, 25.


83. Armitage, "Ontological Anarchy," 120.


86. Bey, T.A.Z., x.

87. "Peter Lamborn Wilson Interview, Part 2."


89. Antliff, Only a Beginning, 13.

90. Meltzer, Anarchism, 61.


92. Day, Gramsci Is Dead, 36-44.

93. Day, Gramsci Is Dead, 35.


95. Bookchin, Anarchism, Marxism, and the Future of the Left, 246, emphasis in original; Bey, T.A.Z., 98, emphasis in original.

97. Flood, "The Other America."


101. Bey, T.A.Z., 70.

102. Sheehan, Anarchism, 77.


108. Bey, T.A.Z., 44.


111. Day, Gramsci Is Dead, 89.

112. Knabb, Situationist International Anthology, 308.

113. Bey, Immediatism, 6.

115. Sheehan, Anarchism, 158.


118. Bey, "Millennium."


121. "Peter Lamborn Wilson Interview, Part 2."

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