

TOWARDS A LESS FUCKED UP UNDERSTANDING OF ADDICTION 1.0

by Norbert Maelstrom - 2015

But Why?

Parts of this are personal. And parts of this are in response to what I've found as a lack of analysis among anarchists and radicals about addiction. There are some good zines and talks about the potential harms of intoxication culture; the connections between substance use, patriarchy and interpersonal violence; and on alcohol and other drugs as tools of colonialism, pacification, etc. I recommend readings like *Towards a Less Fucked Up World* by Nick Riotfag, and *Anarchy & Alcohol* by crimethinc for good starters on those issues, and I'm sure there are some lesser known zines I'm not aware of that address addiction specifically. There is also some great harm reduction analysis and work happening, and some interesting discourse coming out of academia. Most of the anarchist analysis I've come across however doesn't address substance use as it relates to addiction and dependence, which is often a deeply ingrained, sometimes uncontrollable behavior, a form of self-medication or self-harm, a coping mechanism for trauma, and a means of mitigating the severe alienation of life in capitalist society.

This isn't an attempt to paint substance use in a positive or negative light. I really don't care what you do with your body unless it affects me or the people I care about. But I feel that some discussion is needed to address the often misunderstood and devastating reality of serious addiction that touches most of us, either through direct personal experience or through the people we're close to. In addition to the harms that some of us inflict upon ourselves and others while using alcohol and other drugs, there are underlying reasons why we use. For some of us, these reasons are far more complex and deeply ingrained than for others. Our reasons don't excuse us when our substance use harms others, but it's a lot easier to become straight edge or build a critique of the harms of drug use if you've never had a significant addiction problem. Many people who are "addicted" or "dependent" (I'll touch more on language later) are wonderful, intelligent, caring people with good politics; but we do bad things sometimes, and it's often ourselves who we harm the most. So how can you live with us if you choose to? And how can we live with ourselves in a world that devalues us and offers little meaningful support if we want to change our use?

I'll be considering harmful substance use, and how it relates to radicals, not from a moralistic or straight edge perspective where substance use/non-use is a lifestyle choice or a political position, but from an addicted/dependent perspective, where substance use is a deeply ingrained habit. I won't be talking about activist "communities," as many of us have no communities, and that word gets tossed around ambiguously far too often.

How do we as radicals and anarchists deal with addiction? How can we be compassionate and empathetic to the user, while protecting ourselves and each other? How do we promote safer, more inclusive spaces, while maintaining body autonomy, and not turning into judgmental assholes? What options and barriers are there for getting help? What can help look like? What alternatives can we create? I can't answer these questions, but hopefully my writing this can help promote further discussion and praxis on how we relate to substance use and its potential harms, being critical of intoxication culture, while respecting people's freedom, and having compassion for drug users as whole and complex people.

What is Addiction? What is Harm?

“It is impossible to understand addiction without asking what relief the addict finds, or hopes to find, in the drug or the addictive behaviour.” - Gabor Maté

As an anarchist, I have a strong aversion to fixed labels, including even the term “anarchist” sometimes. The word “addiction” is a word I’ll be using frequently in this writing, and I’ll be using it interchangeably with terms like “harmful substance use,” and “dependence.” All of these words/terms can carry assumptions and stigma, and it’s difficult trying to find the least fucked up language to use for such a contentious subject. But for the sake of coherence, I think it’s useful to have words, at least for now, that describe substance use that is undesirable, and causes harm. This isn’t an attempt to put anyone in a box, or dehumanize anyone. We’re all complex, dynamic people, and we don’t deserve to be pigeonholed. So I apologize in advance for the lack of ideal language, and I’m open to any criticism.

In his book ‘The Globalization of Addiction,’ Bruce Alexander identifies four distinct meanings of the word addiction:

Addiction1: The traditional meaning of addiction is defined as “1. Rom. Law. A formal giving over of or delivery by sentence of court. Hence a surrender, or dedication of any one to a master. 2. The state of being (self-) addicted or given to a habit or pursuit; devotion.”

Addition2 is defined as socially unacceptable use of alcohol and other drugs: “Some of the ways of using drugs that were labeled addiction in this looser sense did cause serious physical, psychological, or social harm, although they did not entail overwhelming involvement. Others caused no discernible harm other than breaking drug laws or provoking the distaste of polite society.”

Addiction3 is defined as an extension of addiction1, in a harmful sense, that also includes non-drug related behaviors: “During the last decades of the 20th century, many people recognized the similarity between addiction problems that did not involve drugs and the highly publicized miseries of alcoholics and junkies [sic]. Moreover, landmark research showed convincingly that seriously compulsive love relationships and gambling habits [etc...] had the same psychological dynamics as addiction1; [and] could be every bit as overwhelming, intractable, and dangerous...”

And finally, addiction4: Addiction1 describes surrender and overwhelming devotion, but isn’t necessarily harmful. While it can certainly include undesirable things, especially to anarchists, such as “surrender, or dedication of any one to a master” especially by sentence of a court, it could also include non harmful addiction such as overwhelming devotion to art, philosophy, self expression, or possibly anarchism and an uncompromising struggle for total liberation. Addiction1 can be positive or negative, while “Addiction4 designates overwhelming involvements with any habit or pursuit whatsoever when such involvements are not destructive either to the addicted person or his or her society. Therefore, the traditional definition is a combination of addiction3

and addiction⁴.”

For the purpose of this work, I'll be focusing mainly on the definition of addiction³, ie: a harmful and overwhelming devotion to a substance and/or behavior. And since my main area of experience and education is addiction to alcohol and other drugs, I'll be focusing on addiction to substances. Many parallels can be drawn between addiction to substances and addictive behaviors, and addiction to substances is certainly a behavior too, but I'll leave the specifics of non-substance related addictive behaviors to someone with more experience.

So what is a a harmful, undesirable, overwhelming devotion to a substance? I could give you endless personal stories. Like the time I got drunk, stayed out all night, and spent the rent money on crack, and had to borrow from friends and family to survive for the next month. Or the time I hurt someone I was close to, and couldn't remember it when they described it to me the following day. Or the time when I got wasted and slashed my arm open to prove a point in an incoherent argument about sub-atomic particles, severely injuring myself, and terrifying the person I was debating with. Every time something awful happened, I was remorseful and disgusted with myself afterward, and I usually swore that this was the last time ever, only to be using again a month or two later when the shame and hurt had faded. Countless times I've told myself that "I'll learn how to control myself" or "I can get away with it just this once" or "fuck it, I deserve it, the world is fucked anyway – I'll fix everything later." The missed opportunities. The squandered potential. The concussions from fights and falls. The regret, and mind numbing self hatred. The feelings of hopelessness. And and the terror of loosing control over my behavior or not remembering my behavior. None of this was my desire. I knew things like this would happen again eventually if I drank, and I still drank, because I didn't/don't know how to not drink.

In my current job as a harm reduction worker in a homeless shelter, I work with chronically homeless, alcohol dependent men, many of whom have serious medical conditions. Some of their conditions can be treated by surgeries which often require the person to completely abstain from alcohol and other drugs for several weeks beforehand in order to prepare. Tragically, many continue drinking, and many have died and continue to die rather than getting their conditions treated. Do they have a moral failing or a lack of willpower? Is it a choice? Do they not care if they live or die?

Some men I've worked with have been told numerous times by doctors and nurses that if they continue drinking and using other drugs, it would kill them. They were given numerous advance warnings, they signed living wills, they eventually signed do not resuscitate (DNR) forms, and many of them died, and continue to die. Most of these men weren't/aren't suicidal (a common adage among some in recovery is "I don't want to live, but I'm too afraid to die"). I've been with them as they cried and and expressed their fear of death. I've consoled them over their friends who've died from the same things that they're dyeing from. Jaundice, cirrhosis, sepsis, heart failure, ulcers, cancer, etc. Some have had limbs amputated from drunken accidents. And some live on with things like Korsakoffs syndrome (brain damage caused by alcohol related thiamine deficiency), and need constant care and support. Add to this the alienated families and friends, the

legal problems, the lost dreams and resignation to misery, etc. If the fear of death, devastating isolation, and personal injury aren't enough to persuade some people to stop using drugs, even for a short time, what good are moralism, medicine, punishment, or anything else we can try to force upon the addicted person?

In his book 'In The Realm Of Hungry Ghosts', Gabor Mate defines addiction as: "any repeated behavior, substance related or not, in which a person feels compelled to persist, regardless of its negative impact on [their] life and the lives of others. Addiction involves:

1. compulsive engagement with the behavior, a preoccupation with it;
2. impaired control over the behavior;
3. persistence or relapse, despite evidence of harm; and
4. dissatisfaction, irritability or intense craving when the object – be it a drug, activity or other goal – is not immediately available."

Some of the examples I've given are extreme. For every hardcore user dying of drug related health problems, there are perhaps 50 people who have drug habits that are problematic for them and others who would like to stop or change somehow. And there are many more – most people - who use with little to no harm.

Drugs by themselves aren't addictive. How we relate to them as a result of our environment; our personal biological, psychological and social reality, is what potentially causes addiction. In considering how we relate to drugs, it may be helpful to envision a spectrum of drug use and wellness/harm. I won't make any attempts at defining wellness, as it's generally socially constructed and can mean many different things for different people. But wellness in this case would imply the absence or minimization of harm. A spectrum of wellness/harm in relation to drugs can be fluid, and people can move forward or backward, with the low end of the spectrum having little to no harm, and the high end of the spectrum having severe physical, psychological, and social harm, and ultimately death. For people who subscribe to the disease model of addiction (AA, NA, etc), substance use is a progressive illness which only goes forward. For many this is actually true, and running in circles trying to learn how to use safely can lead to personal catastrophe, social suicide, and untimely death. But the dogma of 12 step groups doesn't apply to everyone, and some are able to find ways to reduce harm without becoming abstinent, depending on their resources, supports, drug(s) of choice, and circumstances in life.

Language Stigma and Essentialism

My name is Norbert and I'm an alcoholic. I'm an addict. I'm a drug user. I'm a drug abuser. My name is Norbert and I have a drug and alcohol problem, and I harm myself and/or others sometimes. I'm a person having an addicted experience. I'm a person. My name is Norbert, and I'm an anarchist, and simplistic labels about my relationship to drugs don't define my existence. Alcoholic/addict are labels that reduce people to inherent characteristics related to their use of substances. I can relate to many self identified alcoholics and addicts, but we're different in many

ways too, and how we used has similarities and differences. Labels also carry stigma and assumptions. Sometimes when I'm at certain meetings I use labels on myself begrudgingly, because I know I'll get funny looks and a condescending lecture about how I'm in denial if I don't. Some find these labels helpful, and even liberating in their journey into recovery. Labels and essentialism can make people feel a part of something. You're 'no longer alone'. There's an explanation, and a neatly packaged identity that sheds light on your suffering. Identifying is tempting, and it can help some people find recovery in 12 step, and other groups.

The term 'alcoholic' or 'addict' is a lot like the term 'fag'. Some gay men have reclaimed 'fag' as a term of casual affection or snark, or even a handle, but for others, and under certain circumstances, it's still a hurtful and oppressive slur. For some, calling themselves 'alcoholics/addicts' and identifying with that term is a useful part of recovery. But for others who aren't invested in 12 step recovery, and especially for people who are actively using, that label, and the stigma and assumptions it carries can be very harmful. How often are people left to rot in emergency waiting rooms presenting with serious injuries, but they've had a few drinks, so their injuries are somehow their fault and they get called to see the doctor last? How often are Native people blamed for their own oppression because some of them seek comfort in a bottle? How often are women blamed for sexual assaults against them because they were drinking when it happened? And how does society devalue drug users who can't or won't quit, as if their addiction exists in a vacuum, and justifies all the hardships they face, denying them the entitlement to services and humanity? The labels and identities that help some, create stigma and general assumptions that harm others – often the most vulnerable.

The disease model is hegemonic for people seeking help with substance use problems. Of the three non-12 step treatment programs I've personally attended, all of them strongly encouraged AA/NA meetings to compliment the treatment. Despite all its flaws and harm, 12 step is unfortunately the most accessible mode of recovery for most of us at this time. We're forced to make do, and conform, and assign ourselves labels, and listen to people talk about god, and hang out in churches, or else suffer and continue in our ways, or hope and strive for some elusive alternative. 12 step can work for some people. My Mother quit drinking in AA when I was young, and that had a hugely positive impact on my life. I've found parts of 12 step groups helpful, and I've met some amazing people there. But unfortunately the good doesn't erase the bad. 12 step programs are pervasive in recovery spaces, and they reinforce labels, stigma, and dogmatic ideas which harm the most vulnerable of drug users, and alienate people from recovery. Since they seem to be the best and only way to get help to many, if it doesn't work for us for a number of legitimate reasons, we tend to lose hope, or blame ourselves for the defects of AA/NA. Also, many of the people in 12 step groups are dogmatic religious fanatics, and as an organization they are stubborn, nostalgic, and unwilling to be self critical or open to change at a macro level.

Aside from the problems of labels, there also exists a hierarchy of types of drug users. "My name is Norbert and I'm an alcoholic" is a lot more socially acceptable than "My name is Norbert and I'm an addict" or "My name is Norbert and I smoke crack" or "Norbert is a crackhead" "glue-bag" "dope fiend", etc. When you quit using alcohol, you're "sober". But when you quit using drugs,

you're "clean" - as if you were a dirty person all along. Alcohol is a drug. I'm a drug user who's favorite drug is ethanol. My dependence on ethanol can potentially cause far more harm than someone else's use of crack, or ketamine, or whatever else. But ethanol is made into a beverage, and sold by corporations, and sanctioned by the state. It has commercials, and endorses public events, and it's portrayed in a positive light sometimes in mainstream media. So despite all the harm I do to myself and others when I drink ethanol, it's still better received by civilized folk than if I tell you that I also smoke crack. Crack is considered dirty because it's illegal and unregulated. Sometimes it can be dirty. I've smoked some bad crack. But that doesn't make me a worse person, or less human, or less deserving of compassion and dignity than someone who's just addicted to ethanol, or someone who's not addicted to anything. AA likes to separate itself from other drug users and treat alcohol as if it's somehow different and special. Drugs that aren't alcohol are considered an "outside issue" and that reinforces the misconception that alcohol isn't a drug.

So who's less human and more deserving of their shitty circumstances in life? The drug user? The alcoholic? The drug abuser? The person suffering from Substance Use Disorder as described in the DSMIV? Or the individual, whole person, who has hopes and dreams, and loves, and experiences pain, and has a Mother? The obvious answer is: don't be an asshole. Language is important, and as drug users, we're often blamed, and often blame ourselves for the systemic injustices we face. Our addictions are considered a choice, and thus we "deserve what we get" and services and compassion for us are scant, the war on drugs is justifiable, and our criminalization, mass incarceration and dehumanization is acceptable to the broader public.

Body Autonomy

What's true for me might not be true for you. If you can get fucked up on the regular with minimal consequence, have fun! Try to take a thiamine supplement if you're drinking every day. Korsakoffs is undesirable. But don't let me tell you what to do. I had to find these things out on my own. Getting wasted can be a beautiful part of life. We lose our inhibitions, and sometimes gain insights and creativity that we wouldn't otherwise have. Before it got consistently bad, I had some magical times in altered states. I met new people, went on spontaneous adventures, committed daring acts of vandalism with little fear, and had impulsive love affairs which were sometimes wonderful. Those experiences are an important part of who I am today. Without them I wouldn't be writing this. But somewhere along the way I lost control. The costs started to outweigh the benefits, and eventually it was mostly cost. How can we recapture the magic of getting high without relying on drugs if we come to a point where drugs are hurting us more than they help us?

Not everybody uses like I did. Most people probably don't. Part of me wants to warn people against relying too much on drug induced states to overcome their inhibitions. But maybe that's just me being paternalistic and projecting my negative experience onto others. Shrinkers call it countertransference. And in most cases, the people who end up having negative experiences with drugs need those experiences to come to their own conclusions. If you tell me that I shouldn't do something, I'm probably going to tell you to fuck off and do it anyway. If you tell me that I've hurt you, or that you care about me, and that I'm hurting you by hurting myself, and maybe add some

explanation, I'll have something to consider.

Nobody should have to be around people who hurt them when they don't want to be hurt. And nobody should be made to feel ashamed for using drugs if they're not hurting anyone who doesn't want to be hurt. We all hurt each other to some degree, using drugs or not. Social dynamics are complicated. But there is a balance to be found somewhere between body autonomy and keeping ourselves and each other safe. "Your right to swing your fist ends where my nose begins" is a good axiom. But what if someone refuses to stop swinging their fist? Or what your fist never came near me and I'm just being controlling and moralistic? It's important for people who use drugs, and people who are close to drug users alike, to establish boundaries, and assert those boundaries clearly and consistently. If we have trouble asserting boundaries, or if we notice that someone we know might be having trouble asserting boundaries, we should have support, and give support. Sometimes drug users need consequences for our actions, which can range from warnings to ostracization, to even a severe beating and a bus ticket out of town, depending on the severity of the transgression. And similarly, if people who use drugs are being harassed and stigmatized by puritanical assholes, for no reason other than that they use drugs, that's not OK, and maybe the those puritans need a good talking to or a punch in the head.

If I need relief from pain, whether physical, emotional, social, or environmental; who are you to tell me tylenol is OK, but cocaine and beer make me a bad person? But if my pain relief causes behavior that brings you pain, something needs to be done.

What is Recovery?

"Once you're a pickle, you can never go back to being a cucumber."

- Some miserable old fuck at an AA meeting somewhere

My writing this doesn't change my addiction. If you're reading this and you're having problems, and can relate to this, it probably won't change your addiction either. If insight and awareness were enough to solve drug related harm, we'd live in a very different world, and my writing this would probably be unnecessary. Many of us who are addicted to drugs are caught in a cycle of socialization/use/harm/recovery/relapse, and left with scarce options for change. The dismal lack of services and support can make the situation seem hopeless, as we're forced into the quasi-religious, disease model of 12 step recovery – or the medical model of psychiatry and medication (or some combination of both). These models can be helpful for some, but both have sordid histories of dogma and abuse, and are especially unpalatable to those of us with strong aversions to religion, doctors, and pharmaceuticals. To make things worse, given that we often harm others in relation to our substance use, the informal supports, and community that could potentially act as an alternative to oppressive methods of "recovery" rarely exist due to our frequent bad behavior and subsequent isolation.

It's often among the most marginalized folks that substance dependence takes the greatest hold. In my experience as a harm reduction worker, it's clear that abstinence simply is not an

option for many people. Chronic homelessness compounds the social, emotional, and physical health problems related to substance use, and vice versa. Class and addiction interact with race, gender, disability, age, etc. The worst of these problems are alien to the more comfortable among the activist milieu, but some of us fall into the shit end of this spectrum. In this way, sobriety is highly privileged in that it's often only attainable to those of us who are the least "fucked up." This isn't to say that some of the more immiserated among us can't become abstinent, or that those who do become abstinent haven't been through misery, but abstinence is an often unrealistic and self-defeating ideal. Some need experimentation with harm reduction to come to abstinence as an end, while others will/can never come to that end, and that's OK, and their struggles and existence are no less valuable.

"Sober/not sober" is an obvious binary. For some of us, drinking/using safely is impossible, and we realize this, but we use anyway because we don't know how to not use. We might realize that the only way to reduce the harm to ourselves and others is to completely abstain, and we struggle to that end. And for some of us, despite the harm and risk of using, being sober is impossible due to a number of hardships and circumstances beyond our control. In many cases, it isn't a choice. It's either a struggle towards our only option for harm reduction - abstinence, or it's an alienating ideal that's unattainable. The term Radical Sobriety has been used a lot recently in various talks and even DIY addiction support groups. While I'm supportive of DIY alternatives to the addiction/treatment industrial complex, I'd be a lot more supportive of something called "Radical Recovery". The only "radical" approach I can see is going to the root of what makes us use harmfully; usually some kind of trauma and alienation, and building a means to heal that doesn't rely on authority. A radical approach to addiction can include abstinence, harm reduction, or any measures that address the root causes of our harm and help us live freer lives. The term "sober" often implies traits such as seriousness, moderation, restraint, etc. I don't want sobriety. I want to not harm myself or others through drug use, and to live a life of unrestrained passion and anarchy. If abstinence is our goal, there's no need to be sober about it.

The binary of "sober/not sober" also puts a higher value on those of us who are "sober" and minimizes the merits of harm reduction for those of us who can't or won't be sober. It can be demoralizing for those of us who have relapses - as if we've lost our value because we had a setback in our struggle against addiction. The critique of this binary can be helpful, but it also shouldn't be used to excuse people's bad behavior - especially relating to harm of others. For some of us, trying to abstain as a means of harm reduction is possible, it just takes a lot of painful self-reflection, seeking help from uncomfortable and imperfect sources, and personal change that we would sometimes rather avoid, or stay in denial about.

Furthermore, the concept of "sobriety" is a social construct that means different things to different people. Pretty much everybody seeks relief or comfort by ingesting something or engaging in behavior that is potentially harmful. Anyone who's been to 12 step meetings is likely familiar with assholes who insist that people who take anti-depressants, or medications to help control their substance use aren't "sober." Many people in 12 step meetings are often hopelessly addicted to cigarettes and caffeine, and by other standards aren't "sober." Some of us take tylenol or cold and

flu medication, some of us replace smoking crack with smoking weed, some of us are addicted to things we can't totally abstain from like food or sex. Not only is "sober/not sober" a binary that tends to devalue some, often the most vulnerable and marginalized among us, but there's really no such thing as "sober." For many of us, it comes down to a baseline and personal goals, and whether we're meeting them or not.

Addiction is usually a response to pain, whether physical, emotional, social, environmental, or any combination thereof. Some traumas can be worked through with time and supports, while other traumas are rooted in things that are still ongoing, like capitalism, alienation, and living under a horrific system of war, racism, patriarchy, classism, heteronormativity, ableism, etc. As people with addictions, we have to have a reason to get out of bed every day and not want to fucking annihilate our consciousness or jump off a bridge. That's what makes religion or a Higher Power so appealing to some in their recovery. It gives life a purpose. But what if we're atheists, or nihilists, and our universe is morally neutral and essentially meaningless? I almost envy people who can bring themselves to believe in some magical positive force that helps them not use drugs. But part of the beauty of not believing in anything is the freedom to create meaning for ourselves on our own terms. It can be difficult to find beauty and create meaning and purpose in such a violent and ugly world. It takes perseverance, and creativity, and often an ability to find humor in the horrific, as well as our own suffering, weakness, and stupidity. How to apply passion and creativity to our day to day lives can be even more difficult than finding it in the first place. For people in recovery, and for many people in general, learning how to not want to jump out of our own skin is a lifelong feat. It really doesn't matter if we destroy ourselves – the world is overpopulated and miserable regardless of what we do - but I have a well established fear of death, and an aversion to suffering, so the rational thing for me to do is to try to create a life that's at worst tolerable, and at best, creative, fulfilling and joyous. In my experience, that means seriously addressing my substance use, usually by seeking help from uncomfortable sources, letting myself be vulnerable sometimes, and finding people I can trust who I can build mutually beneficial relationships and share my problems with.

Just as drug use and harm can exist on a spectrum or continuum, so can recovery. The word recovery implies that we are unwell, and we're undergoing some remedy to address our unwellness. Drugs can make addicted people very unwell, physically, emotionally, and socially, so anything that seeks to improve our situation, be it support groups, meetings, therapy, individual supports, readings, safer use, substitution, diet and exercise, avoiding certain people and certain situations, taking breaks, limiting our access to money, or anything that works toward a safer, healthier, and more fulfilling life can be seen as recovery. Recovery is often a process that involves trial and error, has ebbs and flows, and is a life long undertaking with many setbacks, and hurdles. If anarchist struggle is a tension towards unmitigated freedom and the ability to create our existence on our own terms, then working on ourselves and learning how to minimize the harm we cause to ourselves and the people we care about through our use of drugs is probably an important part of an anarchist life. There were times that alcohol and other drugs were the number one authority in my life, and dictated most of what I could do. A bottle and a pipe were my master.

The Least Worst

AA is fucked up. Psychiatry, medication and the medical model are fucked up. Anarchist and activist circles generally don't have the capacity to provide a viable alternatives to these fucked up institutions, and it's debatable whether creating alternative social services is a useful endeavor for revolutionaries anyway. Most of the treatment options for drug users are abstinence based, and harm reduction services are still in their infancy, and not useful to everybody - especially those wishing to quit completely.

Drug policy reform and promoting better harm reduction services has made real improvements in public health outcomes for drug users, and saved countless lives. The ideological and physical battle over harm reduction has made significant gains, winning Insite, the safe injection site in Vancouver, the right to exist, and making harm reduction measures like needle exchange, crack kits, naloxone, and methadone & diamorphine treatment common sense public health initiatives. Part of the sell is that HR is "fiscally responsible" and saves money in health care and policing costs. The idea of appealing to the authorities for less bad drug policy is obviously repulsive to most anarchists, but many of the harm reduction services that exist now were started without permission or legal safety, and only became "official" after society was forced to admit that they were beneficial. We probably don't want to spend our time lobbying politicians to make less oppressive drug laws, so there's a lot of possibility for direct action and pushing the boundaries around harm reduction. Prisoner support and abolition work can be important, as many people in prison are victims of the war on drugs, and are also in need of harm reduction services. Making harm reduction known and available has had some impact on public opinion and reducing the stigma associated with drug use, as drugs are framed as a public health issue as opposed to a moral or criminal issue. There has been progress, and important victories in the harm reduction movement, but there's still a long way to go, and a lot of the work risks relying too heavily on politicians and NGO's to be less oppressive, as opposed to creating the help we need ourselves, without asking permission or appealing to those in power. Public drug advocacy is also a long term battle, and those with immediate needs aren't in a position to hold their breath and advocate for a better world some day.

There are secular 12 step groups in some major cities which exclude the religious and patriarchal language of regular AA/NA, and have a generally less dogmatic approach. There was a controversy in Toronto several years ago when an agnostic AA group was expelled from the larger AA umbrella for replacing the word "god" with "power greater than ourselves" among other small changes in the meetings readings. Agnostic meetings offer a more open and free thinking environment, and use less harmful language, so they can be a "less bad" alternative to AA/NA for some people. They're still abstinence based, and rely heavily on the disease model and labels like "alcoholic" although these things are generally open to free criticism, and even outright rejection at the meetings. While the growth of agnostic AA seems promising, it still doesn't exist outside of most major cities, and some might still find this new "disease model lite" incompatible with their recovery needs.

Some of us might want or need to take a go at regular 12 step meetings. There is certainly help there if one has the capacity to sift through all the assholes and bullshit. I've always felt uncomfortable being honest at 12 step meetings, because everything is so scripted and ideological and I don't want to stand out. But I find it refreshing when I hear someone go off script and ruffle feathers with a dose of honesty. One of the problems with being a critical thinker in 12 step groups is that we're vulnerable when we're seeking help. If AA/NA is worth saving, it needs shit disturbers, but we're often not in a position to challenge the status quo if we're barely hanging on ourselves and desperately seeking help. So if you have to, go with a friend. "Keep an open mind" doesn't mean you have to believe everything they believe, or do everything they do. Take everything with a grain of salt, and be weary of super-keeners who have all the answers. Try different meetings, and gravitate to the solids. Try to resist the urge to punch people in the face (unless they're asking for it).

Whatever the course, there is no ideal treatment for radicals (or most people) if we're seeking help with our drug use problems. If you're a catholic misogynist, AA might be perfectly suited for your recovery needs, but sadly, it's not as inviting to those of us who aren't into Jesus, sexism, and hanging out in church basements with middle class, middle aged nicotine stained sad sacks. I've had to make innumerable compromises in my struggle for recovery. I've taken medications, I've said things that I don't believe, I've believed things that I was too afraid to say, I've sought help from Psychiatric institutions which have horrifying histories of malpractice and abuse. I've juggled harm reduction, abstinence, AA meetings, self help, relapses, setbacks, changing circumstances and goals, and anything that was in any way promising. I've had an extremely difficult time finding and accessing services, and I've barely managed to keep it together. And I'm a social worker, and an addictions worker. Imagine how other people who don't have my experience navigating social welfare systems fare in their recoveries. The success rate for prevalent abstinence based treatments is somewhere around 5% - 10%, and that's not very promising. But those statistics rely on strict and lifelong abstinence as the only definition of success. By their definition, I'm a failure, but here I am writing about addiction, and working with people who use drugs, and living a reasonably fulfilling life.

Radical Alternatives?

What could "radical alternatives" to disease model, medical model, and institutional and industrialized addiction/recovery treatment methods look like? What role can anarchists have in creating a world where drugs users are treated as people, and addiction is understood and treated as a response to terrible conditions as opposed to a moral failing or a criminal depravity? Some utopian future anarchist society might provide much of the freedom and mutual aid needed by drug users, and eliminate many of the alienating conditions that lead some to use harmfully in the first place. But what can we do to to manifest anarchy and healing for drug users in the here and now?

Again, I don't have the answers. Sorry if you were hoping for some profound conclusion and a program of action. These problems need individual and collective reflection and contribution,

trial and error, criticism, experimentation, and time. Furthering a solid analysis around drug use, harm reduction, intoxication culture, stigma, alienation, safer spaces, and body autonomy is an important step in the long term. Creating and consistently maintaining clear personal and group boundaries, and learning how to support each other in our struggles with harmful substance use is something groups can do, but what about people who are isolated? More inclusive spaces that make room for sober people while not shunning people who use drugs are developing, and discussions around the balance between sober/not sober spaces are important. Maybe some radicals have the time, resources, and connections to start some kind of support groups, reading groups, distribute harm reduction materials, or create illegal harm reduction services that will become the Insites of tomorrow. Some of us are social workers, teachers, and harm reduction workers, and can agitate in our jobs for better, more inclusive services and push the boundaries. Some of us attend 12 step meetings or other groups and can be shit disturbers there when we aren't overcome completely with just trying to keep it together today. And some of us can write zines, and brainstorm, and pour our hearts out.

I'm sure with time, if it's a priority, the hive mind can envision and create better ways of treating drug users, who are often vulnerable and traumatized people, but who also sometimes do fucked up things. I'm only one person with some ideas, and maybe everything I think is bullshit. I'd love to hear feedback and update this piece with other peoples criticism. I certainly don't think as anarchists and radicals that we should start focusing all of our time and efforts on turning addiction into some new form of identity politics. But addiction is among us to deal with whether we like it or not - and how we deal with it says a lot about our politics.

Norbert - 2015

Feedback – Hate Mail – Love Letters
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<https://norbertmaelstrom.wordpress.com> (PDF)

References and Suggested Reading

Towards a Less Fucked Up World by Nick Riotfag

http://www.sproutdistro.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/towards_a_less_fucked_up_world.pdf

Anarchy & Alcohol by crimethinc

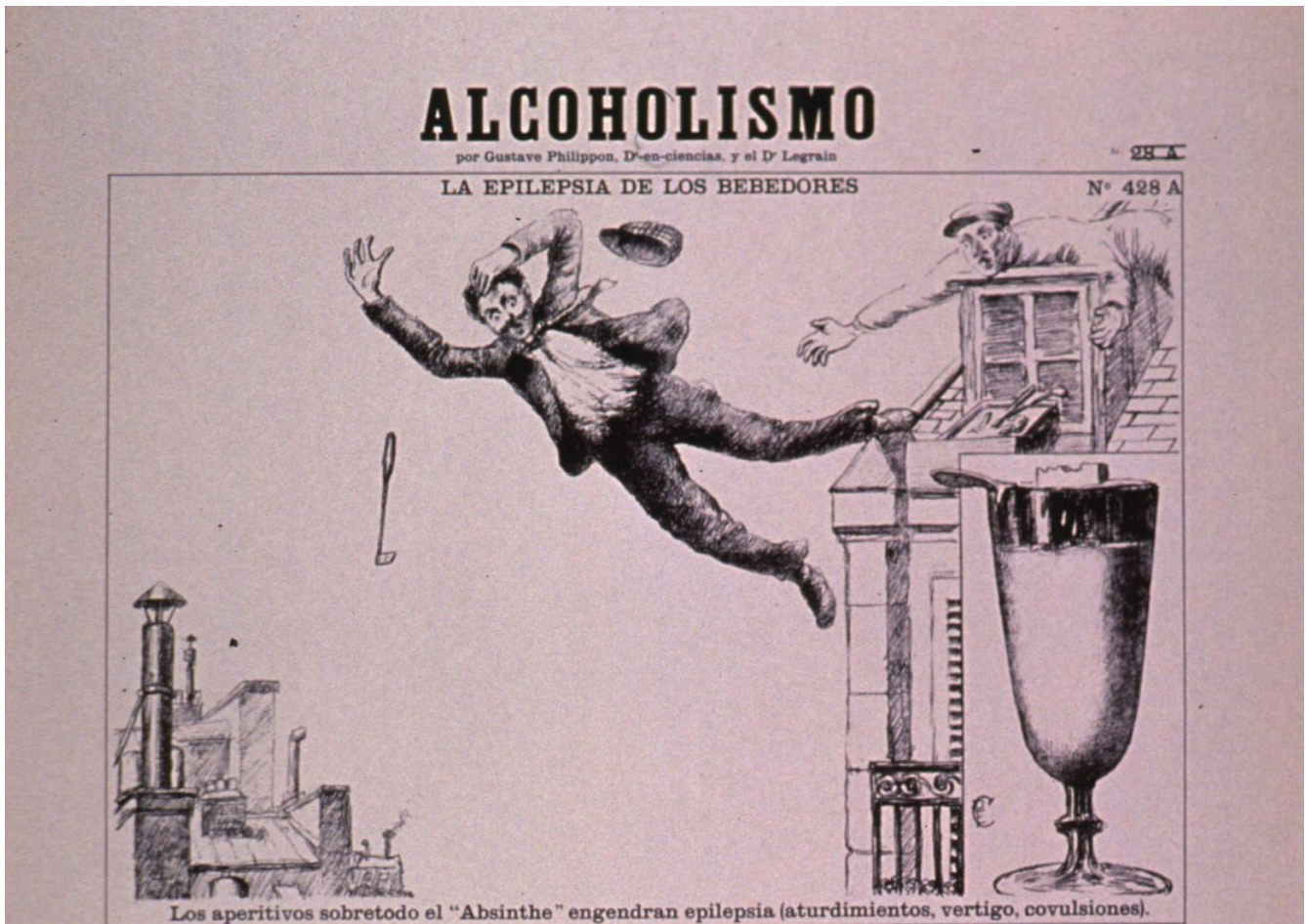
http://crimethinc.com/tools/downloads/pdfs/anarchy_and_alcohol_reading.pdf

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In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts by Gabor Mate

http://zgm.se/files/In_the_Realm_of_Hungry_Ghosts_-_Gabor_Mate__M.D_.pdf

About the Author



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