
TOWARDS ANOTHER ANARCHISM

andrej grubacic

A friend wrote recently :

No one needs another 'ism' from the 19th century, another word which imprisons and fixes meaning; another word that seduces a number of people into the clarity and comfort of a sectarian box and leads others in front of the firing squad or a show trial. Labels lead so easily to fundamentalism, brands inevitably breed intolerance, delineating doctrines, defining dogma, and limiting the possibility of change.

It is difficult not to agree. However, I want to present and discuss here an 'ism' that is the dominant perspective of today's post-Marxist global social movement : Anarchism. I start with a short history of anarchism, in order to be able to subsequently suggest a model of modern anarchism and strategic implications which follow from accepting such a model.

I suggest that this idea of anarchism has coloured the sensibility of the 'movement of movements' of which we are the participants. Today, the ethical paradigm of anarchism represents the basic inspiration of our movement, which is less about seizing state power than about exposing, de-legitimising and dismantling mechanisms of rule whilst winning ever-wider spaces of autonomy from it.

I am inclined to agree with those who see anarchism as a tendency in the history of human thought and practice, which cannot be encompassed by a general theory of ideology, a tendency that — by posing a question of their legitimacy — identifies compulsory and authoritarian hierarchical social structures. If they cannot answer this challenge, which is usually the case, then anarchism becomes the effort to limit their power and to widen the scope of liberty.

Anarchism is a social phenomenon and its contents, as well as manifestations in political activity, change with time. Unlike all major ideologies, anarchism can never have a stable and continuous existence on the ground through being in government or a part of a party system. Its history and contemporary characteristics are determined

by another factor — cycles of political struggle. As a result, anarchism has a ‘generational’ tendency, in fairly discreet historical phases, according to the period of struggle in which they were shaped and can be identified. Like any attempt at conceptualisation, this can be a simplification. But I hope that it will be useful for understanding this social phenomenon.

Historically, the first phase of anarchism was shaped by the late 19th century class struggles in Europe, exemplified both theoretically and practically by the Bakunin faction in the First International. It began in the run up to 1848, peaked with the Paris Commune (1871) and dwindled through the 1880s. This was an embryonic form of anarchism, mixing together anti-state tendencies, anti-capitalism and atheism whilst retaining an essential dependence on the skilled urban proletariat as a revolutionary agent. Bakunin, the magnificent dreamer, the “dynamite, not a man”, in 1848, shouted, “Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony should be saved from the coming fires of the world revolution at the price of giving up one’s life”. He bequeathed to us one of the most beautiful and perhaps the most precise descriptions of a single leading idea within the anarchist tradition :

I am a fanatic lover of liberty, considering it as the unique condition under which intelligence, dignity and human happiness can develop and grow; not the purely formal liberty conceded, measured out and regulated by the State, an eternal lie which in reality represents nothing more than the privilege of some founded on the slavery of the rest; not the individualistic, egoistic, shabby, and fictitious liberty extolled by the School of J J Rousseau and other schools of bourgeois liberalism, which considers the would-be rights of all men, represented by the State which limits the rights of each — an idea that leads inevitably to the reduction of the rights of each to zero. No, I mean the only kind of liberty that is worthy of the name, liberty that consists in the full development of all the material, intellectual and moral powers that are latent in each person; liberty that recognises no restrictions other than those determined by the laws of our own individual nature, which cannot properly be regarded as restrictions since these laws are not imposed by any outside legislator beside or above us, but are immanent and inherent, forming the very basis of our material, intellectual and moral being — they do not limit us but are the real and immediate conditions of our freedom. (Michael Bakunin)¹

The second phase, from the 1890s to the Russian civil war, saw a considerable shift to Eastern Europe, and thus had more of an agrarian orientation. Kropotkin’s anarcho-communism was the most dominant feature in theoretical terms. It peaks with Makhno’s army during the Russian Revolution and carries over after the Bolshevik victory in a Central European undercurrent.

The third stage, from the twenties until the late forties, focused on industrially oriented Central and Western Europe. This was the peak of anarcho-syndicalism in terms of theorisation, with much of the work being done by exiles from Russia. In this moment, the differentiation between two basic traditions in the history of anarchism has become clearly visible : anarcho-communist with, one might say, Kropotkin as representative; and on the other hand, anarcho-syndicalism which simply regarded anarchist ideas as the proper mode of organisation for highly complex, advanced industrial

societies. And this tendency in anarchism merges, or interrelates, with a variety of leftwing Marxism — the kind one finds in, say, the Council Communists who grew from the tradition of Rosa Luxemburg, and that was later represented, in a very exciting fashion, by Marxist theorists like Anton Pannekoek.

After World War II, anarchism had a major downturn due to economic reconstruction and surfaced only marginally in anti-imperialist struggles in the South that were, however, largely dominated by pro-Soviet influences.

The struggles of the sixties and seventies did not signify a serious upsurge of anarchism, which was still carrying the dead weight of its history and could not yet adopt a new political language that was not class-oriented. Thus, anarchist leanings were found in very diverse groups, ranging through the anti-war movement, feminism, situationism, Black power etc., but not anything that is positively identifiable as anarchism. Explicitly ‘anarchist’ groups in this period were more or less a recycling of the previous two stages (communist and revolutionary syndicalist), and quite sectarian. Instead of engaging with these new forms of political expression they closed themselves off to them and usually adopted very rigid charters like the anarchists of so called ‘platformist’ Makhno tradition. This was a ‘ghost’ fourth generation.

Currently, there are two co-existing generations within anarchism : people whose political formation took place in the sixties and seventies (actually a reincarnation of the second and third generations), and younger people who are much more informed, among other elements, by indigenous, feminist, ecological and culture-critical thinking. The former exists in various Anarchist Federations, the Industrial Workers of the World, the International Workers Association, the Northeastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists and the like. The latter’s incarnation is most prominent in the networks of the new social movement. From my point of view, Peoples Global Action is the main expression of the current fifth generation of anarchism.

What is sometimes confusing as a characteristic of current anarchism is that its constituent individuals and groups do not usually refer to themselves as ‘anarchists’. There are some who take anarchist principles of anti-sectarianism and open-endedness so seriously that they are sometimes reluctant to call themselves anarchists for that very reason. But the three essentials running through all manifestations of anarchist ideology are definitely there. These are anti-statism, anti-capitalism and pre-figurative politics (in other words, modes of organisation that deliberately demonstrate the world you want to create; or, as an anarchist historian of the revolution in Spain has formulated it, “an effort to think of not only the ideas but the facts of the future itself”). This is present in anything from jamming collectives to IndyMedia — all of which can be called anarchist in the sense that we are referring to a new form. There is only a limited connection between the two co-existing generations, mostly implying the following of what each other is doing, but not much more.

The basic dilemma that permeates contemporary anarchism is between traditionalist and modern conceptions of anarchism. In both cases we are witnesses to the ‘escape from tradition’. I would suggest that ‘traditionalist anarchists’ have not fully understood the tradition.

The term ‘tradition’ can, in the history of ideas, be comprehended in two different

ways. One way (probably the more common one) is that a certain past is accepted as a complete structure that cannot or should not be changed, but should be preserved in its solid state and passed on into the future, unchanged. Such an understanding of tradition is connected to that part of human nature referred to as conservative, prone to stereotypical behaviour — Freud would even say “the compulsion of repetition”. The other meaning of tradition, which I advocate here, relates to the new and creative way of reviving a historical experience. This positive manner of conveying the past, relates to the other side of human nature — provisionally considered revolutionary — along the lines of a paradoxically expressed truth : a wish for a change and, at the same time, a healthy need to remain the same.

Another ‘escape from tradition’ takes refuge in various ‘post-modern’ interpretations of anarchism. I think it is high time for a certain, to quote Max Weber, “disenchantment” of anarchism, an awakening from the dream of post-modernist nihilism, anti-rationalism, neo-primitivism, cultural terrorism, “simulacra”. It is time to restore anarchism to the intellectual and political context of the Enlightenment project that is nothing else but understanding that “objective knowledge is a tool to be used so that individuals can take informed decisions on their own”. Reason, says the famous Goya painting, does not produce monsters when it dreams, but when it sleeps.

Today, a dialogue between different generations within modern anarchism is necessary, as it is imbued with countless contradictions. It does not suffice to surrender to the habit of the majority of contemporary anarchist thinkers who insist on dichotomies. It would be good to abandon the exclusiveness of the either / or way of thinking, and engage in discussion, in search of synthesis. Is such a synthetic model possible ? I think it is.

A new model of modern anarchism, which can be discerned today within the new social movement, is the one that insists on widening the anti-authoritarian focus, as well as on abandoning class reductionism. Such a model endeavours to recognise the ‘totality of domination’, that is,

To highlight not only the state but also gender relations, and not only the economy but also cultural relations and ecology, sexuality and freedom in every form it can be sought, and each not only through the sole prism of authority relations, but also informed by richer and more diverse concepts. This model not only doesn’t decry technology per se, but it becomes familiar with and employs diverse types of technology as appropriate. It not only doesn’t decry institutions per se, or political forms per se, it tries to conceive new institutions and new political forms for activism and for a new society, including new ways of meeting, new ways of decision making, new ways of coordinating, and so on, most recently including revitalised affinity groups and original spokes structures. And it not only doesn’t decry reforms per se, but it struggles to define and win non-reformist reforms, attentive to people’s immediate needs and bettering peoples’ lives now as well as moving toward further gains, and eventually transformational gains, in the future. (Michael Albert)²

Anarchism can become effective only if it contains three essential components : worker’s organisations, activists and researchers. How can one create a basis for a modern anarchism on the intellectual, union, and popular level ? There are various ideas about another kind

of anarchism, which would be capable of promoting the values I mentioned above.

First of all, anarchism must become reflexive, in that intellectual struggle must reaffirm its place in modern anarchism. One of the basic weaknesses of the anarchist movement today is, in comparison with the time of, say, Kropotkin or Recluse, or Herbert Read, exactly the neglect of the symbolic, and a sidelining of the effectiveness of theory.

Instead of the anarchists criticising the famous postmodern Marxist fairytale 'Empire', they should write an anarchist 'Empire.' Religious Marxism has, for a long time, referred to theory and, by this token, has given itself a scientific appearance and the possibility of acting as a theory. Today, anarchism requires the overcoming of extremes of both anti-intellectualism and intellectualism. Like Noam Chomsky, I also have neither sympathy nor patience for these. I believe that an opposition between science and anarchism should not exist :

Within the anarchist tradition there has been a certain feeling that there is something regimented or oppressive about science itself. There is no argument that I know for irrationality, I don't think that the methods of science amount to anything more than being reasonable, and I don't see why anarchists shouldn't be reasonable. (Noam Chomsky)³

Like Chomsky, I have even less patience for a strange tendency that has spread, in various forms, within anarchism itself :

It strikes me as remarkable that Left intellectuals today should seek to deprive oppressed people not only of the joys of understanding and insight, but also of the tools of emancipation, informing us that the project of Enlightenment is dead, that we must abandon the illusions of science and rationality — a message that will gladden the hearts of the powerful...(Noam Chomsky)⁴

Before us, further, lies the task of envisioning the anarchist researcher. What would be the role of an anarchist researcher ? She would certainly not lecture, like the old Left intellectuals do. She should not be a teacher, but someone who envisages a new and very difficult role : she must listen, explore and discover. Her role is to expose the interest of the dominant elite carefully hidden behind supposedly objective discourses.

She has to help activists and supply them with facts. It is necessary to invent a new form of communication between activists and activist scholars. It is necessary to create a collective instrument that would connect libertarian scientists, workers and activists. It is necessary to found anarchist institutes, reviews, scientific communities and internationals (such as the Pan network). I believe that sectarianism, unfortunately a very widespread phenomenon in modern anarchism, would in this way lose its power. One of the organised attempts to resist sectarianism in modern anarchism is this outline of a new anarchist international :

The Anarchist International is an initiative meant to provide a venue for anarchists in all parts of the world who wish to express their solidarity with each other, facilitate

communication and co-ordination, learn from one another's efforts and experiences, and encourage a more powerful anarchist voice and perspective in radical politics everywhere. But who wish to do so in a form which rejects all traces of sectarianism, vanguardism and revolutionary elitism.

We do not see anarchism as a philosophy invented in 19th century Europe, but rather, as the very theory and practice of freedom — that genuine freedom which is not constructed on the backs of others — an ideal that has been endlessly rediscovered, dreamed and fought for on every continent and in every period of human history. Anarchism will always have a thousand strands, because diversity will always be part of the essence of freedom, but creating webs of solidarity can make all of them more powerful.

Hallmarks

1) We are anarchists because we believe that human freedom and happiness would be best guaranteed by a society based on principles of self-organisation, voluntary association, and mutual aid, and because we reject all forms of social relations based on systemic violence, such as the State or capitalism.

2) We are, however, profoundly anti-sectarian, by which we mean two things :

a) We do not attempt to enforce any particular form of anarchism on one another : Platformist, Syndicalist, Primitivist, Insurrectionist or any other. Neither do we wish to exclude anyone on this basis — we value diversity as a principle in itself, limited only by our common rejection of structures of domination such as racism, sexism, fundamentalism, etc.

b) Since we see anarchism not as a doctrine so much as a process of movement towards a free, just, and sustainable society, we believe anarchists should not limit themselves to co-operating with those who self-identify as anarchists, but should actively seek to co-operate with anyone who are working to create a world based on those same broad liberatory principles, and, in fact, learn from them. One of the purposes of the International is to facilitate this : both to make it easier for us to bring some of those millions around the world who are, effectively, anarchists without knowing it, into touch with the thoughts of others who have worked in that same tradition, and, at the same time, to enrich the anarchist tradition itself through contact with their experiences.

3) We reject all forms of vanguardism and believe that the proper role of the anarchist intellectual (a role that should be open to everyone) is to take part in an ongoing dialogue: to learn from the experience of popular community-building and struggle and offer back the fruits of reflection on that experience not in the spirit of the dictate, but of the gift.

4) Anyone who accepts these principles is a member of the Anarchist International and everyone who is a member of the Anarchist International is empowered to act as a spokesperson if they so desire. Because we value diversity, we do not expect uniformity of views other than acceptance of the principles themselves (and, of course, acknowledgement that such diversity exists).

5) Organisation is neither a value in itself nor an evil in itself; the level of organisational structure appropriate to any given project or task can never be dictated in advance but can only be determined by those actually engaged in it. So with any project initiated within the International, it should be up to those undertaking it to determine the form and level of

organisation appropriate for that project. At this point, there is no need for a decision-making structure for the International itself but if in the future members feel there should be, it shall be up to the group itself to determine how that process should work, provided only that it be within the broad spirit of decentralisation and direct democracy. (Planetary Anarchist Network [PAN])

Furthermore, anarchism must turn to the experiences of other social movements. It must be included in the courses of progressive social science. It must be in collusion with ideas that come from the circles close to anarchism.

Let's take for example the idea of participatory economy, which represents an anarchist economist vision, par excellence, and which supplements and rectifies anarchist economic tradition. It would also be wise to listen to those voices that warn of the existence of three major classes in advanced capitalism, not just two. There is also another class of people, branded co-ordinator class by these theoreticians. Their role is that of controlling the labour of the working class. This is the class that includes the management hierarchy and the professional consultants and advisors central to their system of control — as lawyers, key engineers and accountants, and so on. They have their class position because of their relative monopolisation over knowledge, skills, and connections. This is what enables them to gain access to the positions they occupy in corporate and government hierarchies.

Another thing to note about the co-ordinator class is that it is capable of being a ruling class. This is, in fact, the true historical meaning of the Soviet Union and the other so called Communist countries. They are, in fact, systems that *empower* the co-ordinator class.

Finally, I believe that modern anarchism has to turn to envisioning the political. This is not to say that various schools of anarchism failed to advocate very specific forms of social organisation, albeit often markedly at variance with one another. Essentially, however, anarchism as a whole advanced what liberals call 'negative freedom', that is to say, a formal 'freedom from' rather than a substantive 'freedom for'.

Indeed, anarchism often celebrated its commitment to negative freedom as evidence of its own pluralism, ideological tolerance, or creativity. The point, however, is that the failure of anarchism to enunciate the historical circumstances that would make possible a stateless anarchic society produced problems in anarchist thought that remain unresolved to this day. One friend told me, not so long ago that "you anarchists always strive to keep your hands clean, with the result that you are finally left with no hands at all." I believe that this remark relates exactly to the lack of more serious thinking about political vision.

Proudhon attempted to formulate a concrete image of a libertarian society. His attempt failed, and was, in my view, utterly unsatisfactory. However, this failure should not discourage us, but rather point to the path followed by, for example, social ecologists in North America — a path leading to the formulation of a serious anarchist political vision. An anarchist model should also encompass the attempt to answer the question :

“What are the anarchists’ full set of positive institutional alternatives to contemporary legislatures, courts, police, and diverse executive agencies” ?

We need to :

Offer a political vision that encompasses legislation, implementation, adjudication, and enforcement and that shows how each would be effectively accomplished in a non-authoritarian way, promoting positive outcomes would not only provide our contemporary activism much-needed long-term hope, it would also inform our immediate responses to today’s electoral, law-making, law enforcement and court system, and thus many of our strategic choices. (Michael Ibert)⁵

Finally, what would be the strategic implications of promoting such a model ? I have often heard from anarchist activists a strategic proposition for which I have neither sympathy nor explanation. We should, they say, make an effort and live worse in order for things to be better. As opposed to this extraordinary logic, which reads “the worse, the better”, I think it would be wiser, and far more sensible, to listen to the advice of Argentinean anarchists which advocate a strategy of “expanding the floor of the cage”. Such a strategy will understand, instead, that it is possible to fight for and win reforms short of revolution in a way that both improves people’s conditions and options now and creates opportunities for further victories in the future.

This strategy implies that being in favour of a new society does not warrant ignoring people’s current pain and suffering. What it does mean is that when we work to address current ills and work to make things immediately better, we do so in ways that raise our consciousness, empower our constituencies, and develop our organisations. And that, therefore, leads to a trajectory of on-going changes, culminating in new basic economic and social structures. Expanding the floor of the cage does not ignore people’s short-term struggles for higher wages, an end to a war, affirmative action, better working conditions, a participatory budget, a progressive or radical tax, a shorter working week with full pay, abolishing the IMF — or whatever else — because it will recognise how people’s consciousness and organisations develop through struggle. And it will actively avoid the kind of activist contempt for people’s courageous efforts to improve the quality of their lives.

To conclude, I think that such a model of modern anarchism could have a significant role in building, amidst the current horrors of capitalism, a post-Marxist movement that would reclaim the values of the Enlightenment and make them finally realise their full potential.

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I would like to thank my friends David Graeber, Uri Gordon and Michael Albert.

Any idea you read here might very well actually have been invented by one of them.

Andrej Grubacic is a historian and social critic, working as an assistant lecturer at the University of Belgrade. He is one of the founders of the Institute for the Research of the Global Movement at the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia). His affinity towards anarchism stems from his experiences as a member of the dissident Belgrade Libertarian Group that descends from the Yugoslav 'Praxis' experiment. In the past year, he has been active in the post-Yugoslav movement — a coalition of anti-authoritarian collectives called Another World is Possible, as well as the international movement called Peoples Global Action.

Notes

- ¹ Bakunin 1970.
- ² Albert 2002.
- ³ Chomsky 1992.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Albert 2002.