

Anarchism, Or The Revolutionary Movement Of The Twenty-first Century

Andrej Grubacic & David Graeber

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It is becoming increasingly clear that the age of revolutions is not over. It's becoming equally clear that the global revolutionary movement in the twenty first century, will be one that traces its origins less to the tradition of Marxism, or even of socialism narrowly defined, but of anarchism.

Everywhere from Eastern Europe to Argentina, from Seattle to Bombay, anarchist ideas and principles are generating new radical dreams and visions. Often their exponents do not call themselves "anarchists". There are a host of other names: autonomism, anti-authoritarianism, horizontality, Zapatismo, direct democracy... Still, everywhere one finds the same core principles: decentralization, voluntary association, mutual aid, the network model, and above all, the rejection of any idea that the end justifies the means, let alone that the business of a revolutionary is to seize state power and then begin imposing one's vision at the point of a gun. Above all, anarchism, as an ethics of practice — the idea of building a new society "within the shell of the old" — has become the basic inspiration of the "movement of movements" (of which the authors are a part), which has from the start been less about seizing state power than about exposing, de-legitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning ever-larger spaces of autonomy and participatory management within it.

There are some obvious reasons for the appeal of anarchist ideas at the beginning of the 21st century: most obviously, the failures and catastrophes resulting from so many efforts to overcome capitalism by seizing control of the apparatus of government in the 20th. Increasing numbers of revolutionaries have begun to recognize that "the revolution" is not going to come as some great apocalyptic moment, the storming of some global equivalent of the Winter Palace, but a very long process that has been going on for most of human history (even if it has like most things come to accelerate of late) full of strategies of flight and evasion as much as dramatic confrontations, and which will never — indeed, most anarchists feel, should never — come to a definitive conclusion.

It's a little disconcerting, but it offers one enormous consolation: we do not have to wait until "after the revolution" to begin to get a glimpse of what genuine freedom might be like. As the Crimethinc Collective, the greatest propagandists of contemporary American anarchism, put it: "Freedom only exists in the moment of revolution. And those moments are not as rare as you think." For an anarchist, in fact, to try to create non-alienated experiences, true democracy, is an ethical imperative; only by making one's form of organization in the present at least a rough approximation of how a free society would actually operate, how everyone, someday, should be able to live, can one guarantee that we will not cascade back into disaster. Grim joyless revolutionaries who sacrifice all pleasure to the cause can only produce grim joyless societies.

These changes have been difficult to document because so far anarchist ideas have received almost no attention in the academy. There are still thousands of academic Marxists, but almost no academic anarchists. This lag is somewhat difficult to interpret. In part, no doubt, it's because Marxism has always had a certain affinity with the academy which anarchism obviously lacked: Marxism was, after all, the only great social movement that was invented by a Ph.D. Most accounts of the history of anarchism assume it was basically similar to Marxism: anarchism is presented as the brainchild of certain 19th century thinkers (Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin...) that then went on to inspire working-class organizations, became enmeshed in political struggles, divided into sects...

Anarchism, in the standard accounts, usually comes out as Marxism's poorer cousin, theoretically a bit flat-footed but making up for brains, perhaps, with passion and sincerity. Really the analogy is strained. The "founders" of anarchism did not think of themselves as having invented anything particularly new. They saw its basic principles — mutual aid, voluntary association, egalitarian decision-making — as as old as humanity. The same goes for the rejection of the state and of all forms of structural violence, inequality, or domination (anarchism literally means "without rulers") — even the assumption that all these forms are somehow related and reinforce each other. None of it was seen as some startling new doctrine, but a longstanding tendency in the history of human thought, and one that cannot be encompassed by any general theory of ideology.¹

On one level it is a kind of faith: a belief that most forms of irresponsibility that seem to make power necessary are in fact the effects of power itself. In practice though it is a constant questioning, an effort to identify every compulsory or hierarchical relation in human life, and challenge them to justify themselves, and if they cannot — which usually turns out to be the case — an effort to limit their power and thus widen the scope of human liberty. Just as a Sufi might say that Sufism is the core of truth behind all religions, an anarchist might argue that anarchism is the urge for freedom behind all political ideologies.

Schools of Marxism always have founders. Just as Marxism sprang from the mind of Marx, so we have Leninists, Maoists, Althusserians... (Note how the list starts with heads of state and grades almost seamlessly into French professors — who, in turn, can spawn their own sects: Lacanians, Foucauldians...)

Schools of anarchism, in contrast, almost invariably emerge from some kind of organizational principle or form of practice: Anarcho-Syndicalists and Anarcho-Communists, Insurrectionists and Platformists, Cooperativists, Councilists, Individualists, and so on.

Anarchists are distinguished by what they do, and how they organize themselves to go about doing it. And indeed this has always been what anarchists have spent most of their time thinking and arguing about. They have never been much interested in the kinds of broad strategic or philosophical questions that preoccupy Marxists such as Are the peasants a potentially revolutionary class? (anarchists consider this something for peasants to decide) or what is the nature of the commodity

¹This doesn't mean anarchists have to be against theory. It might not need High Theory, in the sense familiar today. Certainly it will not need one single, Anarchist High Theory. That would be completely inimical to its spirit. Much better, we think, something more in the spirit of anarchist decision-making processes: applied to theory, this would mean accepting the need for a diversity of high theoretical perspectives, united only by certain shared commitments and understandings. Rather than based on the need to prove others' fundamental assumptions wrong, it seeks to find particular projects on which they reinforce each other. Just because theories are incommensurable in certain respects does not mean they cannot exist or even reinforce each other, any more than the fact that individuals have unique and incommensurable views of the world means they cannot become friends, or lovers, or work on common projects. Even more than High Theory, what anarchism needs is what might be called low theory: a way of grappling with those real, immediate questions that emerge from a transformative project.

form? Rather, they tend to argue about what is the truly democratic way to go about a meeting, at what point organization stops empowering people and starts squelching individual freedom. Is “leadership” necessarily a bad thing? Or, alternately, about the ethics of opposing power: What is direct action? Should one condemn someone who assassinates a head of state? When is it okay to throw a brick?

Marxism, then, has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy. Anarchism has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice. As a result, where Marxism has produced brilliant theories of praxis, it’s mostly been anarchists who have been working on the praxis itself.

At the moment, there’s something of a rupture between generations of anarchism: between those whose political formation took place in the 60s and 70s — and who often still have not shaken the sectarian habits of the last century — or simply still operate in those terms, and younger activists much more informed, among other elements, by indigenous, feminist, ecological and cultural-critical ideas. The former organize mainly through highly visible Anarchist Federations like the IWA, NEFAC or IWW. The latter work most prominently in the networks of the global social movement, networks like Peoples Global Action, which unites anarchist collectives in Europe and elsewhere with groups ranging from Maori activists in New Zealand, fisherfolk in Indonesia, or the Canadian postal workers’ union². The latter — what might be loosely referred to as the “small-a anarchists”, are by now by far the majority. But it is sometimes hard to tell, since so many of them do not trumpet their affinities very loudly. There are many, in fact, who take anarchist principles of anti-sectarianism and open-endedness so seriously that they refuse to refer to themselves as ‘anarchists’ for that very reason³.

But the three essentials that run throughout all manifestations of anarchist ideology are definitely there — anti-statism, anti-capitalism and prefigurative politics (i.e. modes of organization that consciously resemble the world you want to create. Or, as an anarchist historian of the revolution in Spain has formulated “an effort to think of not only the ideas but the facts of the future itself”).⁴ This is present in anything from jamming collectives and on to Indy media, all of which can be called anarchist in the newer sense.⁵ In some countries, there is only a very limited degree of confluence between the two coexisting generations, mostly taking the form of following what each other is doing — but not much more.

One reason is that the new generation is much more interested in developing new forms of practice than arguing about the finer points of ideology. The most dramatic among these have been the development of new forms of decision-making process, the beginnings, at least, of an alternate culture of democracy. The famous North American spokescouncils, where thousands of activists coordinate large-scale events by consensus, with no formal leadership structure, are only the most spectacular.

Actually, even calling these forms “new” is a little bit deceptive. One of the main inspirations for the new generation of anarchists are the Zapatista autonomous municipalities of Chiapas, based in Tzeltal or Tojolobal — speaking communities who have been using consensus process for thousands of years — only now adopted by revolutionaries to ensure that women and younger people have an equal voice. In North America, “consensus process” emerged more than anything else from the feminist movement

²For more information about the exciting history of Peoples Global Action we suggest the book *We are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anti-capitalism*, edited by Notes from Nowhere, London: Verso 2003. See also the PGA web site: www.agp.org

³Cf. David Graeber, “New Anarchists”, *New left Review* 13, January — February 2002

⁴See Diego Abad de Santillan, *After the Revolution*, New York: Greenberg Publishers 1937

⁵For more information on global indymedia project go to: www.indymedia.org

in the '70s, as part of a broad backlash against the macho style of leadership typical of the '60s New Left. The idea of consensus itself was borrowed from the Quakers, who again, claim to have been inspired by the Six Nations and other Native American practices.

Consensus is often misunderstood. One often hears critics claim it would cause stifling conformity but almost never by anyone who has actually observed consensus in action, at least, as guided by trained, experienced facilitators (some recent experiments in Europe, where there is little tradition of such things, have been somewhat crude). In fact, the operating assumption is that no one could really convert another completely to their point of view, or probably should. Instead, the point of consensus process is to allow a group to decide on a common course of action. Instead of voting proposals up and down, proposals are worked and reworked, scotched or reinvented, there is a process of compromise and synthesis, until one ends up with something everyone can live with. When it comes to the final stage, actually “finding consensus”, there are two levels of possible objection: one can “stand aside”, which is to say “I don’t like this and won’t participate but I wouldn’t stop anyone else from doing it”, or “block”, which has the effect of a veto. One can only block if one feels a proposal is in violation of the fundamental principles or reasons for being of a group. One might say that the function which in the US constitution is relegated to the courts, of striking down legislative decisions that violate constitutional principles, is here relegated with anyone with the courage to actually stand up against the combined will of the group (though of course there are also ways of challenging unprincipled blocks).

One could go on at length about the elaborate and surprisingly sophisticated methods that have been developed to ensure all this works; of forms of modified consensus required for very large groups; of the way consensus itself reinforces the principle of decentralization by ensuring one doesn’t really want to bring proposals before very large groups unless one has to, of means of ensuring gender equity and resolving conflict... The point is this is a form of direct democracy which is very different than the kind we usually associate with the term — or, for that matter, with the kind of majority-vote system usually employed by European or North American anarchists of earlier generations, or still employed, say, in middle class urban Argentine *asambleas* (though not, significantly, among the more radical *piqueteros*, the organized unemployed, who tend to operate by consensus.) With increasing contact between different movements internationally, the inclusion of indigenous groups and movements from Africa, Asia, and Oceania with radically different traditions, we are seeing the beginnings of a new global reconception of what “democracy” should even mean, one as far as possible from the neoliberal parliamentarianism currently promoted by the existing powers of the world.

Again, it is difficult to follow this new spirit of synthesis by reading most existing anarchist literature, because those who spend most of their energy on questions of theory, rather than emerging forms of practice, are the most likely to maintain the old sectarian dichotomizing logic. Modern anarchism is imbued with countless contradictions. While small-a anarchists are slowly incorporating ideas and practices learned from indigenous allies into their modes of organizing or alternative communities, the main trace in the written literature has been the emergence of a sect of Primitivists, a notoriously contentious crew who call for the complete abolition of industrial civilization, and, in some cases, even agriculture.⁶ Still, it is only a matter of time before this older, either/or logic begins to give way to something more resembling the practice of consensus-based groups.

⁶Cf. Jason McQuinn, “Why I am not a Primitivist”, *Anarchy: a journal of desire armed*, printemps/été 2001. Cf. le site anarchiste www.anarchymag.org. Cf. John Zerzan, *Future Primitive & Other Essays*, Autonomedia, 1994.

What would this new synthesis look like? Some of the outlines can already be discerned within the movement. It will insist on constantly expanding the focus of anti-authoritarianism, moving away from class reductionism by trying to grasp 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 approach does not call for an endless expansion of material production, or hold that technologies are neutral, but it also doesn't decry technology per se. Instead, 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, along the same lines as it already has with revitalized affinity groups and spokes structures. And it not only doesn't decry reforms per se, but struggles to define and win non-reformist reforms, attentive to people's immediate needs and bettering their lives in the here-and-now at the same time as moving toward further gains, and eventually, wholesale transformation.⁷

And of course theory will have to catch up with practice. To be fully effective, modern anarchism will have to include at least three levels: activists, people's organizations, and researchers. The problem at the moment is that anarchist intellectuals who want to get past old-fashioned, vanguardist habits – the Marxist sectarian hangover that still haunts so much of the radical intellectual world – are not quite sure what their role is supposed to be. Anarchism needs to become reflexive. But how? On one level the answer seems obvious. One should not lecture, not dictate, not even necessarily think of oneself as a teacher, but must listen, explore and discover. To tease out and make explicit the tacit logic already underlying new forms of radical practice. To put oneself at the service of activists by providing information, or exposing the interests of the dominant elite carefully hidden behind supposedly objective, authoritative discourses, rather than trying to impose a new version of the same thing. But at the same time most recognize that intellectual struggle needs to reaffirm its place. Many are beginning to point out that one of the basic weaknesses of the anarchist movement today is, with respect to the time of, say, Kropotkin or Reclus, or Herbert Read, exactly the neglecting of the symbolic, the visionary, and overlooking of the effectiveness of theory. How to move from ethnography to utopian visions – ideally, as many utopian visions as possible? It is hardly a coincidence that some of the greatest recruiters for anarchism in countries like the United States have been feminist science fiction writers like Starhawk or Ursula K. LeGuin⁸.

One way this is beginning to happen is as anarchists begin to recuperate the experience of other social movements with a more developed body of theory, ideas that come from circles close to, indeed inspired by 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. Parecon theorists argue for the existence of not just two, but three major classes in advanced capitalism: not only a proletariat and bourgeoisie but a “coordinator class” whose role is to manage and control the labor 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 maintain their class position because of their relative monopolization

⁷Cf. Andrej Grubacic, *Towards an Another Anarchism*, in: Sen, Jai, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar and Peter Waterman, *The World Social Forum: Against all Empires*, New Delhi: Viveka 2004.

⁸Cf. Starhawk, *Webs of Power: Notes from Global Uprising*, San Francisco 2002. See also: www.starhawk.org

over knowledge, skills, and connections. As a result, economists and others working in this tradition have been trying to create models of an economy which would systematically eliminate divisions between physical and intellectual labor. Now that anarchism has so clearly become the center of revolutionary creativity, proponents of such models have increasingly been, if not rallying to the flag, exactly, then at least, emphasizing the degree to which their ideas are compatible with an anarchist vision.⁹

Similar things are starting to happen with the development of anarchist political visions. Now, this is an area where classical anarchism already had a leg up over classical Marxism, which never developed a theory of political organization at all. Different schools of anarchism have often advocated very specific forms of social organization, albeit often markedly at variance with one another. Still, anarchism as a whole has tended to advance what liberals like to call ‘negative freedoms,’ ‘freedoms from,’ rather than substantive ‘freedoms to.’ Often it has celebrated this very commitment as evidence of anarchism’s pluralism, ideological tolerance, or creativity. But as a result, there has been a reluctance to go beyond developing small-scale forms of organization, and a faith that larger, more complicated structures can be improvised later in the same spirit.

There have been exceptions. Pierre Joseph Proudhon tried to come up with a total vision of how a libertarian society might operate.¹⁰ It’s generally considered to have been a failure, but it pointed the way to more developed visions, such as the North American Social Ecologists’s “libertarian municipalism”. There’s a lively developing, for instance, on how to balance principles of worker’s control — emphasized by the Parecon folk — and direct democracy, emphasized by the Social Ecologists.¹¹

Still, there are a lot of details still to be filled in: what are the anarchist’s full sets of positive institutional alternatives to contemporary legislatures, courts, police, and diverse executive agencies? How 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 — not only provide long-term hope, but to inform immediate responses to today’s electoral, law-making, law enforcement, and court system, and thus, many strategic choices. Obviously there could never be an anarchist party line on this, the general feeling among the small-a anarchists at least is that we’ll need many concrete visions. Still, between actual social experiments within expanding self-managing communities in places like Chiapas and Argentina, and efforts by anarchist scholar/activists like the newly formed Planetary Alternatives Network or the Life After Capitalism forums to begin locating and compiling successful examples of economic and political forms, the work is beginning¹². It is clearly a long-term process. But then, the anarchist century has only just begun.

⁹Albert, Michael, *Participatory Economics*, Verso, 2003. See also: www.parecon.org

¹⁰Avineri, Shlomo. *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1968

¹¹See *The Murray Bookchin Reader*, edited by Janet Biehl, London: Cassell 1997. See also the web site of the Institute for Social Ecology: www.social-ecology.org

¹²For more information on Life After Capitalism forums go to : www.zmag.org

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Retrieved on May 14th, 2009 from www.zmag.org
ZNet. January 06, 2004. David Graeber is an assistant professor at Yale University (USA) and a political activist. Andrej Grubacic is a historian and social critic from Yugoslavia. They are involved in Planetary Alternatives Network (PAN).

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