Revolutionary Group Praxis in Social Anarchism

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Crisis encourages the organizing of groups for mutual aid, a collective attempt to stay alive and preserve ourselves. However, radical effort put into survival can only address immediate issues and will not result in social transformation or long-term survival. During social unrest, the formation of groups often takes on characteristics of "least-common-denominator" organizing. When collaboration is a matter of life or death and expediency is a necessity, unity becomes so valuable that it is preferred at almost any cost. Betty Cannon notes in the article "Group Therapy as Revolutionary Praxis" that after "the emergency has passed, if the group is to continue to exist, it must work on itself as well as the world" (138.) If this reflective, reciprocal, and externalized work is not done, a group in flux will either dissolve or become alienating as it rigidly defines itself and demands loyalty. A revolutionary transformation in our society requires conscious effort to develop the collective as well as the individual, both politically and socially. Today, combining anarchism and organization is nuanced and incites skepticism in dogmatic Marxists and lifestyle individualists, but in social anarchist thought, a specific organization is capable of revolutionary group praxis on the political level.

In a review of especifismo, a contemporary iteration of this anarchist tradition, Charlotte Murphy explains that this particular theory was "inspired by the history of anarcho-communists and platformists [and] calls for the creation of a specific anarchist [organization] dedicated to a social revolution against the capitalist system and replacing it with a system of libertarian socialism" (1.) The anarchist communists of Collective Action describe the scope of this project as a:

> "a fundamental reassessment of what we do and what we hope to achieve. It also means returning, as Vaneigem would call it, to the politics of "everyday life." This means reorientation of our practice to both the social and political level and utilizing the richness of our own political tradition to clarify and improve our own organizing efforts" (4.)

In organizing, social anarchists do not begin their analysis and engagement at the level of the group or society at large. According to especifist theory, the self-disciplined social work of an active minority of militants, committed to a common strategy, is the most effective way to bring

about societal transformation and libertarian socialism. So, "everyday life" should be understood as the lived experiences of people, including militants. For this reason, unity of theory and strategy are obligatory because this unity is the relational cohesion of free individuals. It is the "social" aspect of anarchism.

Cannon's description of revolutionary praxis, which strives, through the group, to provide "a different kind of experience [...] in which the price is not the sacrifice of individuality and the result is genuine community" (139) emphasizes these organizational priorities:

> "In "pure reciprocity," I regard the Other not as an antagonist but as "another self," that is, as a person whom I recognize as being fundamentally like myself in his or her basic humanness. In such a situation, "my partner's praxis is, as it were, at root my own praxis, which has broken in two by accident, and whose two pieces, each of which is now a complete praxis on its own, both retain from their original unity, a profound affinity, and an immediate understanding" (140.)

This idea that the "social context in which revolutionary freedom of thought (and feeling) can occur and in which the only real relations are those between people who support and promote each other's freedom" echoes the libertarian ethics of the specific organization and aligns with the core principle of social anarchist ideology.

In the 2009 article "Especifismo," Adam Weaver's first "succinct point" about this theory is its requirement for a transformative group dynamic: the need for a specific space built around unity (2.) This unity must be voluntary, not because "group terror" demands allegiance from every member but because revolutionary space is created by the engaged presence of individuals. Everyone participating must be committed to changing themselves and the world. It is in this collective space that ideas "are held irrespective of the general social framework and therefore not subject to the mediations of capitalism and the state" (CA 2.) In this carefully cultivated group, anarchist militants can realize new relationships and praxis that an individualist or authoritarian theory would never conceive.

In the struggle for libertarian socialism and in revolutionary praxis generally, "ethical behavior involves the free promotion of another's free project – relating the Other always as an end and never as a means" (Cannon 140.) Revolutionary group praxis also implies a critique of groups "driven by spontaneity and individualism" for their "fruitless actions to be repeated over and over, with little analysis or understanding of their consequences" (Weaver 3.) In the context of revolutionary group therapy, Cannon argues that the continued existence of a group requires a "metamorphosis" in the individual members and in the world. This change is "sustained by each group member's continued action on the self, the group, and the world" (137.) Likewise, in social anarchist ideology, the specific organization is a confluence of militant praxis (individual freedom) and social transformation (changes in the external world.) So, on the political level, the group praxis of a specific organization can serve a corrective function "that allows a new sense of what it means to be grouped and what it means to be an individual within a group that respects and furthers each person's freedom" (149.)

This is the strength of revolutionary group praxis: it provides the space for the needed growth of consciousness. Rather than subjugate its membership with truisms and dogma, the specific anarchist organization aims to strengthen itself over time, through the lived experiences of militants engaged in social movements. The militants are themselves the direct source of information

regarding the effectiveness of their own theory and ideology. The metamorphosis of the group occurs in conjunction with that of the militants themselves. "The Specific Anarchist Organization [...] can act as a vital line of continuity for anarchist communist ideas" (CA 3.) As their ability to apply theory dynamically improves, the ideology is strengthened through their social insertion, which tests and allows for the evaluation and intentional modification of the group's political program.

Nevertheless, an effective revolutionary praxis must be committed to transforming the world, not just personal, theoretical, or ideological lines. In the context of revolutionary praxis, understanding these complexities and acting intentionally in the world "is the work of the group, and [...] stakes are very high indeed." (Cannon 142.) "The principle of social insertion, in its most basic form, is to propagate direct action and direct democracy" (Murphy 3.) Social anarchists do not wish to simply transform people intellectually, without any responsibility to the oppressive conditions of others or recognition of their agency as revolutionary forces in their own lives.

Unlike the ideology of lifestyle or cultural anarchism, social anarchists direct their individual praxis at the world, in a collective and unified way. It is insufficient to experience transformative freedom personally, from a remote setting. Such an experience, secluded and secure, would not be revolutionary because it would aim to transform people through ideas rather than experiences. But the knowledge gained from study is not enough to bring about a new society. It is impossible to anticipate the external forces that will inevitably reveal the shortcomings of our knowledge. In revolutionary praxis, the aim is always to "export this new-found freedom to the external world," (Cannon 145) not in a doctrinal way, but reciprocally, as the result of self-reflection and a commitment to a libertarian socialist future. There are both strategic and ethical reasons that the specific anarchist organization recognizes the agency and subjecthood of the people that make up the working class because "through daily struggles, the oppressed become a conscious force." (Weaver 4.)

In theory as in practice, social anarchism does not objectify the oppressed but, instead, intends to struggle ethically with them, in the world, to transform individual consciousness of exploitation into group praxis. Collective Action cites Marx when making the distinction between "the class acting in itself, subject to a common condition under capitalism, towards a class-for-itself, a self-conscious grouping acting to its own material interests – communism" (2.) Weaver adds that:

> "[brought] about by organic methods, and at many times by their own self organizational cohesion, [the oppressed] become self-conscious actors aware of their power, voice and their intrinsic nemeses: ruling elites who wield control over the power structures of the modern social order" (4)

It is "through praxis, rather than being 'taught' by an intellectual vanguard, [that] the contradictions of capital and labour [can] become clear" (Murphy 3.) Like militants, workers need a metamorphosis, in themselves and in their collective methods, in order to change society. In popular movements and in political organizations, revolutionary ideas cannot be forced upon others "through a leadership, through a mass line, or by intellectuals" (Murphy 5.)

In Social Anarchism and Organisation, the Federação Anarquista do Rio de Janeiro define social revolution by distinguishing it from the concept of political revolution which "only occurs on a political level, through the state" (22.) Rejecting hierarchical leadership, political parties, and

state power of all forms, especifist theory contrasts anarchism to "alternative arrangements that reorganize society around a new centre, notably Leninism which would promote the party to the centre to manipulate the periphery" (Murphy 2.) There is also a distinction to be made between the social insertion of especifists, which aims to build social power through strategic unity and collective struggle, and the entryism of Trotskyists, which inserts itself in social movements to extract militant converts and build political power elsewhere (MR.)

A truly revolutionary group is "a double negation – of serial impotence on the one hand and individualist action on the other" (Canon 137.) As such, it can be "focused almost entirely on the task at hand" (138.) It develops power and acts effectively through the unifying focus of the group, not through centralized decision-making or by "towing the line." In constantly testing the ideology of the revolutionary organization, in developing its theory and strategy, in determining the social fronts for its struggle, militants in a specific anarchist organization are individually committing to a program that is itself strengthened by the commitment of their comrades. This creates a diaspora of action and personal responsibility on the part of the militants struggling in social movements. Therefore, the "line" is not something which subjugates but enables the actions of militants, and without a specific anarchist organization, less libertarian groups will meet the demand (CA 3.)

In complex and dynamic situations, the theoretical and strategic lines of the specific organization allow individual militants to continue to apply the focused power of the group. In this way, they can interpret changing dynamics outside of the ideological confines of the organization so as not to compromise their social work. The particular application of a common ideology maintains momentum on the social level in ways that cannot be predicted theoretically. This testing of the group's program through individual experience, feedback, and input is a distinct feature of social anarchism as opposed to other radical organizing methods. According to the FARJ:

> "With this well-defined political line everyone knows how to act and, in case of having practical problems, it is well known that the line should be revised. When the theoretical and ideological line is not well defined and there is a problem, there are difficulties in knowing what needs to be revised. It is, therefore, the clarity of this line that allows the organisation to develop theoretically" (57.)

Weaver adds that militants can also use this strict and explicitly anarchist line to "address the multiple political currents that will exist within movements and to actively combat opportunistic elements of vanguardism and electoral politics" (5.) This is supported by critiques of anarchist exiles, during the Russian revolution, who blamed the lack of anarchist organization for the Bolsheviks' ability to rule the workers' councils through a centralized, single-party command (3.)

Especifist militants are disciplined and committed individuals that struggle together to realize a revolutionary political program. They do not follow or believe in an ideology; they practice it. Nor do they have the goal of "converting" or indoctrinating people because, for social anarchists, the means must ethically promote and employ freedom. "Anarchist militants should not attempt to move movements into proclaiming an anarchist position but should instead work to preserve their anarchist thrust; that is their natural tendency to be self-organized and to militantly fight for their own interests" (Weaver 5.) Social anarchists collectivize to overcome individuation of action, not to deny individual praxis.

There are, however, "revolutionary" ideologies that rely entirely on a group praxis that demands rigidity from its militants and only gains power through increasing its membership. As opposed to an active minority building power on the social level, authoritarians want their power to become institutional. They want individual experience to be subsumed in the obligations of maintaining the group. Contrary to revolutionary transformation, holding political power creates the social context for inauthentic self-sacrifice and dehumanization, instead of revolutionary struggle through solidarity.

In describing institution, Cannon explains, "Each person, in order to perpetuate the institution, must make himself or herself into a "stereotype praxis" supporting a rigid future that is in reality a reproduction of the past" (139.) By contrast, producing revolutionary theory within the specific anarchist organization "aims to update obsolete ideological aspects or seeks to adapt ideology to specific and particular realities" (FARJ 55.) Murphy concludes that "theoretical unity must be informed by the local context of popular movements [...] and the struggles of exploited classes," adding the fact that the "theoretical line [...] in Australia, would look different to that of South America" (3,) firmly grounding the organization in its distinct reality.

On the social level, the immediate work of efforts such as mutual aid must remain genuinely popular. Social work, unlike political organizing, has an ethical obligation to be a synthesized endeavor. At its core, the social level is egalitarian and anti-exclusionary. Still, the especifists make clear "not everything that was produced or is produced theoretically within anarchism serves the practice we want" (FARJ 56.) This includes our own individual and collective actions and beliefs. If we want to change our world, we have to change ourselves as well as our methods of group praxis. To do this we need an explicitly revolutionary space where people can trust each other. Therefore, on the political level, the specific anarchist organization "is also a way of learning to live one's relations with others in groups and dyads differently, based on a radical reorientation of one's relationship to self/world" (Cannon 143.) In this way, the struggle for libertarian socialism can be a transformative (and potentially therapeutic) experience.

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Retrieved on 12th October 2021 from www.anarkismo.net
The article argues that especifismo, and social anarchism more generally, addresses problems that are fundamental to interpersonal relations and group praxis, while not resorting to coercive or vanguardist methods.

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