

Anarchafeminism

Towards an ontology of the transindividual

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1. Why *anarcha-feminism*?

It has become something of a commonplace to argue that in order to fight the oppression of women, it is necessary to unpack the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect with one another. No single factor, be it nature or nurture, economic exploitation or cultural domination, can be said to be the *single* cause sufficient to explain the multifaceted sources of patriarchy and sexism. Intersectionality has consequently become the guiding principle for an increasing number of left-wing feminists, both from the global north and from the global south. As a result, there is hardly any publication in the field today that does not engage with the concept of intersectionality – whether to promote it, to criticize it, or simply to position oneself with regards to it.

Yet, strikingly enough, in all the literature engaging with intersectionality, there is barely any mention of the feminist tradition of the past that has been claiming exactly the same point for a very long time: anarchist feminism, or as I prefer to call it “*anarchafeminism*.” The latter term has been introduced by social movements trying to feminize the concept, and thereby give visibility to a specifically feminist strand within the anarchist theory and practice. This anarchafeminist tradition, which has largely been neglected both in the academia and in public debate more in general, has a particular vital contribution to offer today.

To begin with, together with queer theory path-breaking work aimed at dismantling the gender binary “men” and “women,” it is important to vindicate once again the need for a form of feminism that opposes the oppression of people who are *perceived as* women and who are discriminated precisely on that basis. Notice here that I am using the term “woman” in a way that includes all types of women: female women, male women, feminine women, masculine women, lesbian women, transwomen, intersex women, queer women, and so on and so forth. Despite the alleged equality of formal rights, women are still objects of consistent discrimination and the advancement of queer rights can be accompanied by retrogress on women’s battles that we thought had been won once and for all (from the right to abortion to equal pay for equal work).

Far from being an issue of the past, feminism is therefore more imperative than ever. Yet, it must be supported by an articulation of women’s liberation that does not create further hierarchies, and this is precisely where anarchafeminism can intervene. While other feminists from the left have been tempted to explain the oppression of women on the basis of a single factor, anarchists have always been crystal clear in arguing that in order to fight patriarchy we have to fight the multifaceted ways in which multiple factors – economic, cultural, racial, political, etc. – converge to foster it.

This neglect, if not outright historical amnesia, of an important leftist tradition is certainly the result of the ban that anarchism suffered within academia in particular and within public debates in general, where anarchism has most often been misleadingly portrayed as a mere call for violence and disorder. Yet, this is a ban that happened to the detriment of historical accuracy, global inclusiveness, and political efficacy.

My proposal is to remedy such a gap by formulating a specific anarchafeminist approach adapted to the challenges of our time. The point is not simply to give visibility to an anarchafeminist tradition, which has been an important component within past women’s struggles, and thereby reestablish some historical continuity, although this alone would certainly be a worthwhile endeavor. Besides historical accuracy, recovering anarchafeminist insights has the crucial function of enlarging feminist strategies precisely in a moment when, as intersectional feminists

have argued, different factors increasingly converge to intensify the oppression of women by creating further class, cultural, and racial cleavages among them.

At a time when feminism has been accused of being mere white privilege, this task is more crucial than ever. The emancipation of women from the global north can indeed happen at the expense of further oppression of women from the global south who most often replace them in the reproductive labor within the household. It is precisely when we adopt such a global perspective, all the more necessary today because of the increased mobility of capital and labor forces, that the chain linking gendered labor across the globe becomes apparent and the timeliness of anarchafeminism all the more evident. We need a more multifaceted approach to domination, in particular, one able to incorporate different factors as well as the different voices coming from all over the globe. As Chinese anarchafeminist He Zhen wrote at the dawn of the twentieth century in her *Problems of Women's Liberation*:

“The majority of women are already oppressed by both the government and by men. The electoral system simply increases their oppression by introducing a third ruling group: elite women. Even if the oppression remains the same, the majority of women are still taken advantage of by the minority of women. [...] When a few women in power dominate the majority of powerless women, unequal class differentiation is brought into existence among women. If the majority of women do not want to be controlled by men, why do they want to be controlled by women? Therefore, instead of competing with men for power, women should strive for overthrowing men's rule. Once men are stripped of their privilege, they will become the equal of women. There will be no submissive women nor submissive men. This is the liberation of women.”¹

The timeliness of these words, written in 1907, shows how prophetic anarchafeminism has been. And here also comes the answer to our question – why anarchafeminism? – because it is the best antidote against the possibility of feminism becoming simply white privilege and, thus, a tool in the hands of a few women who dominate the vast majority of them. In an epoch when the election of a single woman as president is presented as liberation for *all* women, or when women such as Ivanka Trump can claim feminist battles of the past by transforming the hashtag *#womenwhowork* into a tool to sell a fashion brand, the fundamental message of anarchafeminists of the past is more urgent than ever:

“Feminism does not mean female corporate power or a woman president: it means no corporate power and no president”.²

2. Why feminism and why women?

At this point one may object: why insist on the concept of feminism and not just call this anarchism? Why focus just on women? If the purpose is to dismantle all types of oppressive hierarchies, should we not also get rid of the gender binary, which opposes “women” to “men,” and thus also imprisons us in a heteronormative matrix?

¹ He Zhen, “Women liberation”, in *Anarchism. A documentary history of libertarian ideas*, Vol 1, edited by Robert Graham, (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2005), pp.341.

² Peggy Kornegger, “Anarchism: The Feminist Connection,” in *Quiet Rumors*, (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2012), 25.

We should be immediately clear that when we say “women” we are not speaking about some supposed object, about an eternal essence, or, even less so, about a pre-given object. Indeed, to articulate a specifically feminist position while maintaining a multifaceted understanding of domination, we need a more nuanced understanding of “womanhood.” By drawing insights from a Spinozist ontology of the transindividual, I argue that bodies in general, and women’s bodies in particular, must not be considered as individuals, as objects given once and for all, but rather as processes. Women’s bodies, like all bodies, are bodies in plural because they are processes, processes that are constituted by mechanism of affects and associations that occur at the *inter-*, *intra-* and the *supra-*individual level. To give just a brief example of what I mean here, think of how our bodies come into being through a *inter-*individual encounter, how they are shaped by *supra-*individual forces, such as their geographical locations, and how they are made up by *intra-*individual bodies such as the air we breath or the food we eat.

Only if women bodies are theorized as processes, as sites of a process of becoming that takes place at different levels, only then will we be able to speak about “women” without incurring the charge of essentialism or culturalism. If we adopt this transindividual ontology, we can also use the concept of woman outside of any heteronormative framework, and thus use the term in such a way that it comes to include all types of women: feminine women, masculine women, female women, male women, lesbian women, bisexual women, intersex women, transwomen, ciswomen, asexual women, queer women, and so on and so forth. In sum, all those bodies that identify themselves and are identified through the always changing narrative “womanhood.”

To sum up on this point, this transindividual understanding allows us to articulate the question “what does it mean to be a woman?” in pluralistic terms, while also defending a specifically feminist form of anarchism. Developing the concept of women as open processes also means going beyond the individual *versus* collectivity dichotomy: if it is true that all bodies are transindividual processes, then the assumption that there could be such a thing as a pure individual, who is separate, or even opposed, to a given collectivity, is at best a useless abstraction and at worst a deceitful phantasy.

3. Which women? And which anarchafeminism?

So if anarchafeminism is the lens, what should be the framework for such an enterprise? Adopting an anarchafeminist lens also means taking the entire globe as the framework for thinking about the liberation of women. This implies going beyond any form of methodological nationalism, that is, of privileging certain women and thus certain national or regional contexts. If fighting the oppression of women means we have to fight all forms of oppression, then statism and nationalism cannot be any exception. If one begins by looking at the dynamics of exploitation by taking state boundaries as an unquestionable fact, one will automatically end up reinforcing the very oppression that one was meant to question in the first place. Put in a slogan, we could say: “the globe first” because the framework is the message, and adopting anything less than the entire globe as our framework is at best naïve provincialism, and at worst obnoxious ethnocentrism.

Whereas several feminist theories produced in the global north have failed to understand the extent to which the emancipation of white, middle-class women happened at the expense of a renewed oppression of working-class racialized bodies, anarchafeminists have traditionally

adopted a more inclusive perspective. It is not a coincidence that most anarchist theorists, from Kropotkin to Reclus, have been geographers and/or anthropologists. By exploring the processes of production and reproduction of life independent of state boundaries and on a planetary scale, these authors not only were able to avoid the pitfalls of any form of methodological nationalism, but could also perceive the global interconnectedness of forms of domination, beginning with the intertwining of capitalist exploitation and colonial domination. This is not just a remark about theorists: such a global framework has been very well present among activists as well, not only in the global north, but also in the global south. For example, different anarchafeminist programs in Latin America have taken the common property of the globe as their framework for thinking political action, bypassing any sense of national belonging and often also emphasizing the racialized dimension of women's oppression.

A side remark, notice that though I am using labels such as Latin American or Chinese anarchism, I would also argue that all those labels must be used as a ladder that we should abandon as soon as we have reached the top: the vitality of the anarchafeminist tradition consists precisely in its capacity to transcend state boundaries, methodological nationalism, and even the Eurocentric biases that a lot of radical theory produced in the global north still carries within itself. It is very revealing, for instance, that most of the feminist tools, whether rooted in Marxist feminism, post-structuralist feminism, or radical feminism, derive from theories produced in a very small number of countries. We can actually name and count them with one hand: France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and perhaps Italy. To combat this Eurocentric trend, and the subsequent privileging of Western Europe, it is pivotal to bring to the center of the discussion texts produced by anarchists worldwide, thereby arguing for a form of feminism beyond Eurocentrism, and beyond ethnocentrism.

4. The coloniality of gender: Another woman is possible.

If we take the globe as our framework, the first striking datum emerging is that people across the globe have not always been doing gender, and, moreover, even if they did do it, they did it in very different terms. It is only with the emergence of a worldwide capitalist system that gender binary "men" versus "women" became hegemonic worldwide. This does not mean that sexual difference did not exist before capitalism. It simply means that binary gender roles were not as universally accepted as the primary criteria by which to classify bodies. Modern capitalism made the mononuclear bourgeois family, with its binary gender roles, hegemonic.

Marxist feminists have long since been emphasizing how capitalism needs a gendered division of labor because, being predicated on the endless expansion of profit, it needs both the extraction of surplus value from waged productive labor as well as unpaid reproductive labor, which is still performed largely by gendered bodies. Put bluntly, capitalism needs "women," because it needs the assumption that women are not "working" when they wash their husband's and children's socks: they are just performing their reproductive function, and thus fulfilling their very nature.

As Maria Mies, among others, emphasized, perceiving women's labor not as proper work, but as simply the result of their gender, is pivotal to keeping the division between "waged labor", subject to exploitation, and "unwaged labor," subject to what she called "super-exploitation."³

³ Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale. Women in the International Division of Labour*, 1986, London, Zed Books

This form of gendered exploitation is “super” because, whereas the exploitation of waged labor takes place through the extraction of surplus value, that of women’s domestic labor takes place via denial of the very status of work.

By building on these types of insights, Maria Lugones has recently put forward the very useful concept of the “coloniality of gender.”⁴ With this move, she aims to emphasize how the binary division “men/women” and the classification of bodies according to their racial belonging went together, being exported by Europeans through the very process of colonial expansion that accompanied the worldwide spread of capitalism. Within the American context, Lugones showed how gender roles were much more flexible and variegated among Native Americans before the advent of European settlers. Different indigenous nations had, for instance, a third gender category to positively recognize intersex and queer subjectivities, whereas others, such as the Yuma, attribute gender roles on the basis of dreams, so that a female who dreamed of weapons became a male for all practical purposes. There has been a systematic intertwining among capitalist economy, racial classification of bodies, and gender oppression.

It is manifest, and yet all too often forgotten, that to classify people on the basis of their skin color, or their genitalia, is not an a priori of human mind. Classifying bodies on the basis of their sex, as well as classifying them on the basis of their race, implies, among other things, a primacy of the visual register. Such an primacy, according to Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí is typical of the West, particularly when looked at from the perspective of some African pre-colonial cultures. As she points out in her seminal “The Invention of Women,” the OyoYoruba cultures, for instance, relied much more on the oral transmission of information than on its visualization, and they valued age over all other criteria for social hegemony.⁵ They did not even have a name to oppose men and women before colonialism: put bluntly, they simply did not do gender.

Therefore, questioning the coloniality of gender means also questioning the primacy of the visual: it is by seeing bodies that we say: “here is a woman!” or “that is a man!.” But it is also within such a visual register that we have to operate to question such hegemonic and heteronormative views of womanhood and thus open new paths toward subverting them. Put in a slogan, we could say:

“Another woman is possible; another woman has always already began.”

5. An ongoing manifesto:

These words, “another woman is possible; another woman has always already began” could indeed be the starting point for a new anarchafeminist manifesto. In contrast to other manifestos, the latter would inevitably have to be open and ongoing, as ongoing as the transindividual ontology that sustains it. Starting with Errico Malatesta’s insight that anarchism is a *method*, and thus not a *program* that can be given once for all, the writing of such a manifesto could proceed along three axes:⁶

FIRST: At the beginning was movement: anarchism does not mean absence of order, but rather searching for a social order without an orderer. The main orderer of our established ways

⁴ Maria Lugones, “The Coloniality of Gender,” *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016).

⁵ Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women. Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁶ Errico Malatesta, *Anarchia*, (Rome: Datanews, 2001), 39.

of thinking about politics is the state. Because we are so accustomed to living in sovereign states, we for instance tend to perceive the migration of bodies across the globe as a problem. On the contrary, we should remember that, whereas sovereign states are a relatively recent historical phenomenon (for most of humanity, peoples have lived under other types of political formations), human beings have been migrating across Earth since the very appearance of so-called *Homo sapiens*. *Homo sapiens* is therefore also a *Femina migrans*, or perhaps even better, an *Esse migrans*. Hence, the need for an anarchafeminism beyond boundaries and beyond ethnocentrism.

SECOND: Just do it : Do not aim to seize state power or wait for the state to give you power, just start exercising your own power right now. Aiming to seize state power, or asking for recognition from it, means reproducing that very same power structure that needs to be questioned in the first place. This means not only “think globally, and act locally.” It also means that freedom is within everybody’s reach and can be exercised in a number of ways that are not mutually exclusive: resist gender norms, play with them, refuse to comply, civilly disobey, boycott capitalism, and so on and so forth. These actions are not simply “lifestyle anarchism,” or “individualist strategies,” as some have labeled them. They are political acts per se, which can go hand in hand with larger projects, such as the increasing examples of mass mobilization, general strikes, communal living and queering the family that are proliferating around the globe. To think about bodies as transindividual processes also means that we should escape the false alternative between individual *versus* collective strategies, and work at all different levels. Global is the oppression, so global has to be the fight.

THIRD: The end is the means, the means is the end : there cannot and there should not be any fully-fledged political program for an anarchafeminist manifesto. If freedom is the end, freedom must be the means to reach it. Anarchism is a method for thinking as well as for acting, because acting is thinking and thinking is acting. In the same way in which bodies are plural and plural is their oppression, plural must also be the strategy to fight such an oppression. As anarchists have been saying for a long time: “multiply your associations and be free.” In other words, search for freedom in all your social relations, not simply in electoral and institutional politics, although the latter can also be one of the levels to operate in. But if freedom is both the means and the end, then one could also envisage a world free from the very notion of gender as well as the oppressive structures that it generated. Because gendered bodies are still the worldwide objects of exploitation and domination, we need an anarchafeminist manifesto here and now. But the latter should be conceived as a ladder that we may well abandon once we have reached the top. Indeed, it is implicit, in the very process of embarking in such an anarchafeminist project, that we should strive toward a world beyond the division between men and women and thus also, in a way, beyond feminism itself.

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