Post-anarchism in Practice

From Affinity Group to Lacanian Cartel

Duane Rousselle

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Note

I wrote this paper at the request of an anarchist colleague, despite the fact that I do not care much for "anarchist politics." Despite my better judgment, I had sent it to Anarchist Studies for publication, as an attempt to showcase a practical 'post-anarchism' in psychoanalytic working groups within the School of Lacan. It was not something I wanted to write nor a case that I wanted to make. Be wary of friends! Anarchist publications are segregationist (tribal) and thereby outline the very problem that I was trying to rectify. Moreover, they read whatever they wish into an argument (i.e., the claim that this was a 'post-structuralist' paper, as a case for its dismissmal, which is it ***resolutely*** *not!).*

I post here, for anybody who is interested in reading it.

Abstract

Questions of social organization have been central to anarchist theory since the modern period. At the center of these discussions is a model of anarchist organization known as the 'affinity group' or 'collective.' The 'affinity group' model forms the basis for the intervention of this essay. However, this intervention is also informed by the obscure organizational model proposed by Max Stirner, popularly known as the 'union of egoists.' The problem with Stirner's model is that it was never sufficiently developed. Hence, in this paper I hope to provide an introductory framework for thinking about the anarchist affinity group, and the nihilistic 'union of egoists,' through the framework of the psychoanalytic working group invented by Jacques Lacan. I propose three fundamental themes: first, the replacement of the 'place of power' with the function of the 'plus-one'; second, the re-emergence of the problem of mastery through the problem of segregation, and; third, the rejection of American 'pragmatic ideology' within anarchism and the promotion of emphasis on 'what doesn't work.'

Keywords: Post-Anarchism, Psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, Affinity Group

Introduction

The question of social organization — a sociological concern just as much as a political concern — has been central to anarchist theory and practice since the modern period (see Kinna, 2007). For example, in 1897 Errico Malatesta made a plea to anarchists to take the question of social organization seriously since it alone would ensure the coherence of the anarchist movement, He wrote that anarchists should admit "as a possibility the existence of a community organized without authority, that is without compulsion — and anarchists must admit the possibility, or anarchism would have no meaning — let us continue to discuss the organization of the anarchist movement (Malatesta, 1897). Similar themes can be traced from early thinkers such as William Godwin (1756–1836), Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), and Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921). This thread runs into the work of later anarchist thinkers such as Murray Bookchin (1969), Colin Ward (1966, 1973), and many others.

In the late modern and contemporary period, the "affinity group" emerged as a possible model of tactical anarchist social organization (Bonano, 1985; Bookchin, 1969; CrimethInc, 2017; Kinna, 2007). It originated in the informal and intimate *tertulias* — small groups gathered together within Spanish cafes and artistic venues (Bookchin, 2012) — but later gained political coherence as *grupos*

de afinidad ("affinity groups") within the Federación Anarquista Ibérica. Their structure solidarity became vital for broader anarchist efforts to resist fascism within Spain and showed that small-scale networks of individuals could work together — both *within* their affinity group and *across* affinity groups in a federation — to transform disparate populations into revolutionary agents of political practice. However, within the contemporary period, the affinity group has become a site of investigation into the *here-and-now* practice of emancipation: could the affinity group model function as an emergent or prefigurative political model of social organization (see Day, 2005; Gordon, 2017)?

The affinity group model was harnessed as a revolutionary catalyst within the context of a civil war in Spain (Bookchin, 1969). These groups consisted of approximately 12 members who met regularly to coordinate activities amongst themselves and within larger assemblies of groups steered by an overarching 'peninsular committee.' The role of this overarching committee was not to regulate the affinity groups but rather to offer them administrative support (i.e., distribution of resources, wider planning, facilitation of discussions, etc) and to ensure coherence across the network of groups (ibid.). This coherent but decentralized structure, driven by the active engagement of its autonomous members, became an effective force in the struggle against Francisco Francos' fascist forces. Notably, the groups did not require an internal mechanism for instilling a desire for work, action, or practice among its members — a mechanism that produces what psychoanalysts call 'hystericization' (see Fink, 1997: 133). However, what the psychoanalytic group accomplishes internally, and what, more generally, clinical psychoanalysis accomplishes internally, is the incitation of each subject to work in the cause of their own desire. Hence, unlike the affinity group, the function of hystericization of desire is installed within the group itself rather than as a provocation by outside political forces.

For the purposes of demonstrating the importance of the 'place' of this function of hystericization within the domain of social organization studies, we might claim that there is 'political hystericization' and 'psychoanalytic hystericization.' The former relies upon an external provocation, without which one wonders if the desire to work for a cause could have been secured whatsoever. This distinction of the 'place' of the function of hystericization is crucial and has deep implications for work in groups. Within the affinity model constituents of a group depend upon provocations and confrontations with the external political milieu. It is on this basis that internal coherence among constituent elements of the group or assembly are assured. In a word, the drive to act and to work on behalf of a cause arises first and most fundamentally from forces outside of the group without which the sustainability of the group is jeopardized. As a point of contrast, psychoanalytic groups in the 'School' of Jacques Lacan depend upon an internal mechanism adhered to the place known as 'plus one.'

The 'plus one' is a place occupied by one member of the group. From this place, a function is installed. The function of the 'plus one' is to disrupt problematic group formations on behalf of the cause or desire of each one, that is, precisely to secure each one's ability to pursue their own work independent of the various group formations that would attempt to stifle this work. Moreover, Lacan introduced this model of the psychoanalytic working group in order to force a topological confrontation of 'inside' and 'outside.' It was a model of social organization that refuses to suture the space of 'inside' and 'outside,' ensuring that the group does not close itself off from what it resists or refuses but finds itself at the very site of its mutual contamination in order to work one's way through it. This psychoanalytic sociology was motivated by the Freudian

discovery of the unconscious, which is quite precisely the place for each subject where 'inside' and 'outside' are brought together in an endless confrontation.

The Freudian unconscious is nothing more than the hypothesis that there is something radically 'other,' 'outside,' or 'foreign,' at the very center of my internal world. This is just as true for mental space as it is for social space. It is for this reason that Lacan claimed, boldly, that the "unconscious is politics" (as quoted by Miller, 2003). This famous, but enigmatic, statement from Lacan has been interpreted in diverse ways, but, at its base, it reveals a connectivity of interiority and exteriority, reminding us that we are never safe from those forces that exist outside of the barricades of the mental and social spaces we've constructed for ourselves. In the final instance, a barricade, like an Ego, is a space of defense against a tumultuous reality that never quite goes away. Lacan's neologism is orienting: "extimacy." He went on to define the unconscious as a topological space grounded on a notion of "extimacy." As Lacan's student, Jacques-Alain Miller, has put it: "[we] use the term extimacy […] to be equivalent to the unconscious itself. In this sense, the extimacy of the subject is Other" (Miller, 2003). We might be tempted to conclude that there was scant attention on the social topology of extimacy, to the 'unconscious as politics,' among the anarchists during the Spanish civil war, but there are, in fact, moments of revelation. To take one example, the *mujeres libres,* or "free women of Spain," posed questions concerning the internal coherence of anarchist and Marxian movements by challenging their inherited patriarchal assumptions (see Ackelsberg, 2005). This thereby reveals the contamination of the inner space by the catastrophic outer space.

My claim is that this allows us to see the practical significance of post-anarchism. Indeed, post-anarchists have rejected assumptions of an "uncontaminated" space, that is, of a space uncontaminated by power (see Newman, 2004; also see Newman, 2004b). Newman, drawing from the work of Ernesto Laclau, wrote that "political identities, no matter how particular, cannot exist without a dimension of universality that contaminates them. It is impossible for a group to assert a purely separate and differential identity because part of the definition is constituted in the context of relations with other groups" (Newman, 2004b). On the other hand, the psychoanalytic working group proposes a much more radical solution. By insisting that the unconscious is politics, which implies that psychical and social space is always contaminated, one presumes that there is no space from which to act, and that, moreover, one must take this as a given. Miller therefore concludes that one must become a parasite in one's mode of conduct in the world, and, moreover, one must produce parasitic organizations: "extimacy is not the contrary of intimacy. Extimacy says that the intimate is Other, like a foreign body, a parasite" (Miller, 2003). Psychoanalysis proposes a model of social organization that begins with this principle: that the individual, in its relation to its cause or desire, and, relatedly, the social group which preserves this cause, is fundamentally parasitical (see Miller, 2007).

The affinity group serves as a viable and practical anarchist experience in social organization. However, it could benefit from an overhaul during a "period of post-anarchism" (Call, 2010). Despite the centrality of affinity groups to anarchist practice since the time of the Spanish civil war, it remains a relatively undertheorized aspect of social organization. Scholarship on the affinity group remains largely historical and descriptive rather than sociological. In other words, anarchist scholars more often describe what the affinity "is" or "was" and seldom interrogate its fundamental presuppositions or experiment with its possibilities. The remainder of this essay aims to contribute a novel introductory framework for thinking about how anarchist affinity groups might be developed as a post-anarchist practice. In particular, it aims to demonstrate that the

psychoanalytic working group, invented by Jacques Lacan, but inspired by the British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, provides some insight into how it might be the post-anarchist practice *par excellence.* This allows post-anarchists to overcome the critique that post-anarchism is an 'ivory tower' preoccupation devoid of practical implications (Cohn & Wilbur, 2010; Sasha K, 2003). I therefore propose three interventions: first, a practical critique of the 'problem of verticality,' by which I mean the thesis that 'place' is always and by necessity a 'place of power' that the 'place' should be removed in all instances because it operates as a locus of power and mastery; second, a practical critique of the 'problem of horizontality,' by which I mean the thesis that the removal of the 'place of power' will not introduce new problems into the social group which are of concern for anarchists (such as segregationism), and; third, a critical reflection upon the prevalence and emergence of the ideology of 'practice' within wider anarchist theory.

The 'Vertical Problem': The Place of Power

One well-known post-anarchist intervention into classical anarchism, and indeed classical liberal political theory more generally, concerns the 'place of power' (see Newman, 2001, 2004; Rousselle, 2012). Modern political theory, particularly those which are explicitly indebted to the Western enlightenment, had an implicit conception of 'place' in their thinking about the nature of power. Newman wrote that for anarchism "power was to be understood in terms of an abstract position or place in the social, and having its own structural imperative, which instantiated itself in different forms" (ibid., 141). The 'problem of verticality,' in my view, concerns the way in which this discussion of the 'place of power' has played out. Post-anarchists, with Saul Newman at the fore, though I do not exclude myself from this problematic characterization, have conflated 'place' and 'power.' Thus, while the post-anarchist critique of the 'place of power' is thoughtfully articulated, since it concerns the presupposition of repressive conceptions of power, the 'problem of verticality' reveals another oversight: 'place' is dismissed in every case as a synonym for domination, power, and mastery, even in its post-anarchist rectification. The modern anarchist solution has been to attempt to remove the very place from power, thereby obscuring the function of place with that of one possible quality: power or repression. Indeed, this is also a problem that we see in the work of Michel Foucault and his followers (see May, 2012). May wrote: "the world is a place where power speaks" (ibid.).

The psychoanalytic working group retains 'place' as a function. However, it does not follow anarchists, classical or post-, in presuming that 'place' and its function, as if by necessity, or as though it were only natural, involves power, mastery, or domination. If there is only power in the world, then there is only one discourse from which the subject can be inserted. Yet, psychoanalysis, over the course of more than one hundred years of empirical evidence, shows us that there are *other* discourses (see Fink, 1997). The 'place' typically reserved for power within a psychoanalytic working group is associated with an agency known as the 'plus one.' Its function is to facilitate the continual abolition of any manifestation of mastery. Though this is not always successful, we can say that it depends upon the right installation of coordinations, that is, those of a psychoanalyst who has shattered the fundamental fantasies of power (Miller, 2007). The plus-one does not operate in the interests of domination or repression, but this can only be guaranteed on the condition that the one who occupies such a position is a psychoanalyst — one who operates according to the psychoanalytic discourse. In this way, post-anarchist practice diverges from any

political project which seeks the elimination of the 'place of power,' but without returning back to the political discourse, as happens with many forms of Marxism.

Newman wrote that "from its beginnings [modern] political theory has always conceived of power as emanating from a central, symbolic place or position in society" (Newman, 2004: 139). This conception of power has had profound implications for modern ideals of freedom, liberation, and revolution. For example, it implies that "the operation of power was seen to deny human subjectivity, prohibit freedom, and distort the objective truth of social relations" (Newman, 2004: 143). The role of anarchist theories of social organization, then, involved the removal of the place of power and the consequent obstruction of the function of repression. It was believed that this would give way to communal freedom and creative potential, untarnished by power (see Newman, 2001; see May, 1994). However, what Newman, May, and other post-anarchists have not noticed is the following: there has been a theoretical conflation of 'place' with 'power,' whether in its 'repressive' or its 'productive' variations. The post-anarchists have often therefore *generalized* the conception of place rather than abolished it: *the place of power is everywhere.* The conflation of place with power has contributed to discussions which have emphasized 'non-places,' 'multiplicities of places,' and the 'dislocation' or 'displacement' of power and subjectivity across a range of political or cultural registers (Newman, 2001; May 1994). The problem of verticality is therefore a problem that extends the modern conception of power into the contemporary, and it is one possible problem of contemporary post-anarchist theory.

The 'Horizontal Problem': Against Segregation

I define the problem of horizontality as a novel one within anarchism. Psychoanalytic practice demonstrates that the eradication of the place of power re-introduces mastery and power in a more potent form, as if through a different topological register. If the affinity group is founded upon a voluntary bond of trust, and if it organizes itself horizontally, outside of any vertical dimension to power, then it may very well succumb to a second and much more delicate problem: that of segregationism. IN this arrangement, the problem of verticality, which was a problem of exploitation, repression, and domination, becomes replaced by the problem of segregation. For Jacques Lacan, this is, in fact, an even worse situation than the one which precedes it within vertical social arrangements (see Lacan's seminar of 1971 titled "… Or Worse"; Lacan, 2023). The problem shifts from exploitation or domination *within* a social group toward a problem of segregation *between* social groups. The social group under these circumstances frequently confronts an inhospitable world and opts in large part from greater insularity. In some respects, it is a social arrangement defined by greater isolationism or social retreat: the group retreats from the domain of society as such, that is, from 'universality,' and seeks refuge within its tribe. We might claim that the affinity group achieves a false sense of safety within this insular internal world.

Lacan has taught that the removal of the symbolic 'place' of power, as in the master, can, in fact, give rise to a much more ominous threat within the 'real' of one's social environment (Lacan, 2023). New psychical masters populate the environment, their provocations far exceeding those of traditional masters — everywhere is a potential threat: around the dinner table with one's family, in the school yard, on the television, in books, and so on. The only solution is to cancel them, one by one, until the world's fire has been extinguished and replaced by the convictions of the inner world. Except, of course, the inner world is intimately tied up with the

outer world, and no amount of cancellation will ever provide the intended relief. Equipped with this awareness, the psychoanalytic working group of Lacan overcomes the problem of verticality without succumbing to the problem of horizontality: it proposes a model of social organization that resists discourses of mastery without succumbing to the nightmare of segregative politics.

While modern anarchism has succeeded in theorizing a critique of the problem of verticality, it has not been able to theorize or indeed practice a social arrangement that overcomes the problem of segregation. For anarchists, the problem of verticality has referred to a mechanism of power which operates within a social arrangement that we can call a world (i.e., capitalist, statist, authoritarian, patriarchal, etc). However, the problem of horizontality introduces the mutual exclusion of groups, that is, alienation *between* groups, each other group being a suspicious threat based upon discrete signs of those already in the know (i.e., fascism, mastery, sexism, and so on). Indeed, the problem of horizontality occurs via a conception of power that abolishes unidirectional and repressive models of power in favor of the multi-directional and affirmative model of power (see May, 1994). The removal of the repressive apparatus of power, constituted as a place, promotes an affirmative logic whereby each individual or group is free to voluntarily associate with constituents of other groups. It is this freedom to associate, known in anarchism as the principle of 'voluntary association,' which shifts power from an *explicit* register toward an *implicit* register: one freely selects those with whom one associates based upon affinity, while implicitly denying the humanity or revolutionary potential of others. In this case, mastery and power are *extrinsic* to the group since the group confronts a qualitatively foreign and dangerous universe.

Everywhere the affinity group confronts enemies, and these enemies are all the more fierce precisely because the affinity group has come into existence. The problem of horizontality therefore concerns the *non-relation* among discrete groups of qualitatively different political or cultural orientations and convictions (see Sumic, 2012). Indeed, Lacanian psychoanalysts recognize in this *non-relation*, which is at the very heart of social groups and movements grounded in the problem of horizontality, the perpetuation of capitalist discourse. As Sumic has put it: "the social bond that exists today is one presented under the form of dispersed individuals [and groups] that are but another name for the dissolution of all links or unbinding of all bonds" (ibid.). She continued, "these [are] features of the capitalist discourse, and they could, then, be brought together into a single syntagm of generalized proletarization" (ibid). In other words, the problem of horizontality, in the realm of politics, reveals a paradoxical class, that of the proletariat, who have themselves become parasites of the traditional social order, anarchists, without realizing it. The principles of 'free association' or 'voluntary assembly,' which were key to modern and late modern conceptions of anarchist social organization, transform into an implicit denial of political or social difference — of those whose cause is identical to the group, and perhaps even lost or assimilated to the group. What is lost in the problem of horizontality is precisely this: the unconscious, and, most notably, as politics.

Psychoanalytic working groups, known as 'cartels,' provoke and challenge the very emergence of problems in verticality and horizontality. The product of work for each one is not recuperated by the group, nor is it *reactive,* or provoked by the wider political society. Rather, the product of work is intimately related to the cause of each one in their confrontation with the cause of their own desire. The cartel ensures this through a practice of "epistemological anarchism" (a phrase that I borrow from Andrew Koch, 1993). The practice of hystercization aims at the desire of each one in the group, isolated and suspended from group effects (the latter of which could include power, transference, mastery, or segregation, among others). The post-anarchist

cartel might develop a model of social organization akin to what Max Stirner called a "Union of Egoists," insofar as each makes their cause their own in a space designed precisely to preserve this very possibility to the greatest extent possible.

Indeed, Stirner wrote of a model of social organization that would not place the cause of any social group ahead of the cause of each one. He wrote: "I, the egoist, have not at heart the welfare of this 'human society,' I sacrifice nothing to it, I only utilize it; but to be able to utilize it completely, I transform it rather into my extension and my creature; I annihilate it, and form in its place the union of egoists" (Stirner, 1845). Similarly, the psychoanalytic working group is not established as a place of power for society but rather as a site of antagonism whose constant epistemological disruptions ensure that power, mastery, and segregation cannot even begin. The subject, in such an arrangement, pursues their own cause against 'fixed ideas' or 'social ideals' that constitute much of political practice today.

The Problem of Practice

The *practical* orientation that has taken hold in the modern period is implicated in an ideological framework of which we are mostly unaware. Indeed, "theory" is seen, even within anarchist texts, as an academic or 'ivory tower' phenomenon, while "practice," even in its paradoxically theoretical inflection, takes centre-stage. The anarchist emphasis on practice fails to account for dominant trends in capitalist ideology, which is, today, largely pragmatic (i.e., 'practice' or 'outcome' focused). Indeed, neoliberalism is above all else a pragmatic ideology whose roots can be found in early 20th century mid-Western academic philosophy (particularly within the hotbed of intellectual productions and social experiments in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Chicago, Illinois; see Rousselle, 2019). It is necessary to mobilize theory as a reflexive tool of "direct action at the level of thought" (Acosta, 2010) so as to counteract the ideological over-determination of practice by capitalist processes. Moreover, theory offers a subjective space from which one might mount an attack against the pragmatic epistemology which serves as the background for much of contemporary anarchist organization.

As for the psychoanalytic working group, it proposes a sort of 'destructive production.' I distinguish 'destructive production' from 'productive destruction' on the basis of 'what doesn't work,' since what is destructively productive is precisely this domain of counter-utility, the *'it doesn't work.'* Conversely, the 'productive destruction' of capitalist processes introduces new and ever more obscure symptoms into the life of those under its reign. Instead of focusing on the utilitarian dimension of practice, Lacanian psychoanalysts focus on the 'impossible' dimension of relational or communal projects; impossible, because they can never work out, except by beginning there, from the point of their impossibility. This therefore might seem incompatible with anarchism, since the latter is often conceived as a 'practice' (Gordon, 2008; May, 1994; Ward, 1973). However, the anarchist preference for 'practice' is arguably a contemporary imposition into classical anarchist texts, revealing or accentuating aspects which were once quite marginal to the *philosophy* of anarchism. Indeed, early anarchist theory did not take care to distinguish so easily between the philosophy or theory of anarchism and its practice.[1]

Modern American political, philosophical, sociological, and psychological scholarship often promoted the application of theory for real-world consequences. Hence, professors and intel-

[1] The Bakunist notion of "propaganda of the deed" would seem to be one possible exception to this claim.

lectuals associated with American universities in the Midwestern states promoted an 'applied sociology,' 'philosophical consequentialism,' 'behavioralism,' 'social work,' and so on (see Rousselle, 2019). There is nonetheless another strain of anarchism which finds itself in tension with this world-view. This latter strain emphasizes not 'tactical practice' but 'disorder,' 'anarchy,' 'destruction,' 'ontological anarchy,' and *what doesn't work*. Hence, there is, within the work of many of the classical anarchists, a preference for disorder, disruption, and even nihilism. What the Lacanian working group proposes is a foregrounding of the limitations to pragmatic philosophy, as Miller has put it:

> Lacan […] sketched out for us the configuration of the contemporary moment, which is pragmatic. Yes, we are pragmatic as everyone is today, but someone still apart — paradoxical pragmatists who do not practice the cult of 'it works.' The 'it works' never works (Miller, 2007).

Lacan gave the name 'real' to that which 'doesn't work.' It is this 'real' that brings patients into our psychoanalytic clinics. In this way, it shares a point of departure with anarchism: from an awareness of the limitations of the old world it asks — how can a new world begin? This possibility, or beginning, is afforded only to those who approach the threshold of a world which works and leap into the space of the *it doesn't work*.

Lacan's claim is that this 'real' of the 'it doesn't work' can be taken as a symptom, and perhaps even a 'social symptom.' The subject embodies this symptom of the wider society. Furthermore, Lacan proposes not the clinical extraction of the symptom but rather the repositioning of the subject in relation to that which *does not work* in the symptom: to find what within the real of the symptom promotes the singularity of a subject whose cause is worth defending. This respect for the singularity of the real for each subject guides not only clinical practice but also the work of psychoanalysis in groups, that is, the work of the 'cartel.' In this way, the psychoanalytic clinic, and the psychoanalytic working group, offer a counterpoint to the hegemonic ideology of our time.

Conclusion

Taken together, these three themes — first, the problem of verticality; second, the problem of horizontality, and; third, the problem of practice — are meant to offer a preliminary entryway into the anarchic social organization and practice of psychoanalysis within the school of Lacan. I propose to call this model the "post-anarchist cartel." Let the "post-anarchist cartel" be the contemporary model of the anarchist affinity group, one updated to suit the times and rid of the social formations that would extinguish the revolutionary potential of each subject in their unique confrontation with a cause worth defending: their own desire. My contention is that the post-anarchist cartel offers a model of practice and social organization on the basis of two fundamental themes: first, the unconscious is politics, and; second, the hystericization that is emblematic of any epistemological anarchism. I propose to others that this paper serve as a preliminary point of departure for your own work on post-anarchist cartels.

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