Gabriel Kuhn in Conversation With Matthew Wilson

Gabriel Kuhn and Matthew Wilson

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Matthew Wilson (MW): We first met about fifteen years ago, at a university seminar to discuss your edited collection of Gustav Landauer's work. Fifteen years before, such an event would have been almost unimaginable, but at that time, it felt quite natural, and normal; anarchism, it seemed to many of us, had replaced Marxism in social movements, but also, increasingly, in academia. I want to explore the present state of anarchism, but before we get to that, I wanted to ask you to reflect on that first decade of what Graeber and Grubacic called 'the anarchist century': at the time, did you share the view that anarchism was rapidly replacing Marxism as the dominant ideology of the left? And, however you felt at the time, how do you see that time now?

Gabriel Kuhn (GK): Yes, I did share that view. One cannot overestimate the impact that the collapse of the Soviet Union had on my activist generation. I became political in high school in Austria in 1988 and quickly embraced the radical left. In 1989, I inquired about starting my university studies in the GDR (East Germany). When I graduated from high school one year later, the GDR was

gone, and the Soviet Union collapsed soon thereafter. It seemed that if you needed any proof about who was right in the ideological battle of the far left, this was it. Marxism appeared discredited, and anarchism was the only player left in town.

A few years later, the Zapatistas seemed to confirm that narrative, and with the anti-WTO protests in Seattle 1999, the paradigm shift in the West appeared complete. I mean, publications such as the *Village Voice* ran articles in which anarchism was presented as 'the pole that everyone revolves around, much as Marxism was in the '60s'. It was hard not to believe the hype. Postmodern theory profited as well. People like Foucault and Deleuze were now seen as radical theorists who had understood the failure of Marxism already in the 1970s. No wonder folks announced the 'anarchist century'. And, indeed, principles such as direct democracy, horizontal organising, or consensus decision-making, all related to anarchist ideals, became commonplace within the radical left. Even Trotskyist organisations pretended to live up to them!

Reflecting on all of this today is rather sobering. Yes, the radical left has become more diverse and shed some outdated ideological baggage. But does it feel like we live in an anarchist century? Ecosystems are collapsing, globalised capitalism appears unassailable, and the most successful protest movements are fascist and fundamentalist. It appears as if the paradigm shift within the radical left hasn't gotten us very far. There are plenty of reasons for that, but I think a crucial factor is that in the midst of all the enthusiasm about a 'movement of movements' and a 'diversity of tactics', some essentials of successful political mobilisation have fallen through the cracks: vision, strategy, and organisational capacity.

Some militants have answered by turning back the clock. They feel that anarchism has proven itself a failure and instead revive dogmatic variants of MLM (Marxism-Leninism-Maoism). As much as I understand the frustration with a confused and muddled radical milieu, I don't believe that's the answer. There's no turning back the clock. But there's definitely a need to improve and sharpen an-

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archism if we want it to be a significant and positive political force in the years to come.

MW: I want to come on to hear your thoughts about where we are now – in relation to anarchism, and radical politics more broadly. But could you expand on those essentials of mobilisation you say fell through the crack – the vision, strategy, and organisational capacity. Some people clearly felt they did these things perfectly well – so what do you think we got wrong?

GK: I think it started with what we might want to call a fetishisation of plurality. 'Meta-narratives' were gone, there were no definite answers, and certainly no hierarchies. In many ways, that was liberating, and I still see it as a necessary historical moment that allowed people to break with narrow-minded and dogmatic views on the left. But the whole thing had unfortunate outcomes. Let's use the three aspects I mentioned as examples.

Vision: To say that there are no 'blueprints' for a better society is a truism; things change, you have to adapt, and much of that better society will be developed as people are creating it. I guess that's what the Zapatistas mean by 'Asking, We Walk', although I don't really know. Anyway. It's fine not to have a blueprint. But in anarchist circles, this often translated into not wanting to talk about the future at all. Any attempt to sketch an anarchist society, even in very broad strokes, was supposedly prescribing in authoritarian ways an outcome that could only be shaped by the masses engaged in dismantling the existing order. But, frankly, why would the masses engage in dismantling the existing order without any reason to believe that whatever comes thereafter will be better than what they have now? And why would they have any such reason to believe if they're never presented with any ideas that seem convincing? No blueprints, that's fine, but *ideas*, even if they, inevitably, will be implemented in various ways by people dependent on place, time, and circumstance. But there are key questions that people want to have answers to before they are willing to replace one sys-

tem with another: How do I get my food? Who will take care of me when I'm sick? Who will help me when I feel threatened? Who ensures that there is a way to get from A to B? Who will dispose of nuclear waste? 'Well, we'll see about that when we get there', is not good enough.

Strategy: Here is a response from a popular, widely read anarchist writer when I questioned his statement that 'strategy as a path to a set destination is a view I increasingly disagree with': 'I critiqued the idea of strategy as a path to a set goal, stating that such an idea was based on a liberal and rationalist worldview and on an alienation of means and ends. I argued for a positional, relational, and contingent vision of strategy directed towards a goal that is constantly re-envisioned on the basis of an evolving present struggle, a goal that is utopic or horizontal, as in constantly receding, rather than a fixed destination we can presently define and expect to reach in the future'. Now, it's not important who that person is, and it suffices to say that it's someone I like and respect. But, in variations, I've encountered this response a zillion times when discussing strategy in anarchist circles, and what it amounts to is simply to throw strategy out the window. The notion becomes so diffuse that it's worthless. To think strategically means to set a goal and ask yourself how to reach it. That is key to any political endeavour. The goal doesn't have to be a 'blueprint', maybe not even a 'fixed' idea, but *something* that others can relate to: council communism, the socialisation of industries, the end of fossil capital, whatever. In fact, I would argue that the political right's willingness and ability to think strategically is one of the main reasons why right-wing radicals have been so much more successful in movement-building in recent decades than left-wing radicals. In Sweden, where I live, we now have a centre-right government at the mercy of the far-right Sweden Democrats who became the second strongest party at the last elections and were founded in 1988 by a small group of neo-Nazis (and I don't mean 'bad people', I mean neo-Nazis). How did they achieve this? Strategy. The party

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In terms of keeping anarchism alive, I don't think we need to worry. It's been around for more than 150 years and it won't disappear anytime soon. As I hinted at before, I think our concern needs to be to improve it. Getting prepared for moments of mass mobilisations is a big part of it. If there's an idea about what to do in those moments, and if there is the organisational capacity to get it done, anarchists can be a crucial factor in steering these moments into an emancipatory direction. Anarchists have plenty of experiences to draw on, they just have to be tied together. It's not about a vanguard, no one is going to lead anyone, but it's about groups of committed revolutionaries who are ready for the revolutionary moment and who know which moves to make when the time comes. In a big world with big challenges, we need to keep on thinking big, nothing less will do.

is run by a core group of friends from way back who, unfortunately, have been playing their cards very well. If you think that playing such a game contradicts anarchist principles, you might be able to make a philosophical argument out of it, but gaining any political ground you will not.

Organisational capacity: Again, plenty of fresh air with activist groups that everyone can join and where everyone has a say and where there aren't any leaders. However, all of this, functions on the assumption that the individuals involved bring enough personal responsibility to the table to make formal structures unnecessary. Unfortunately, that personal responsibility isn't always brought to the table, but the personal still takes centre stage. What do I mean? Example: You meet with a few people preparing an event and divide tasks until you meet again the week thereafter. So, you meet the week thereafter, and someone says, 'Gabriel, have you put up the flyers?', and Gabriel says, 'No, I didn't get around to doing it'. In my experience, that's where the conversation ends. Gabriel didn't get around to doing it, and that's that. And if someone dares to ask, 'Gabriel, why not?', it makes that person the asshole. That might be very good for Gabriel, but it's not for the group. I understand that the example is very basic. But you can multiply and enlarge it, and I think you'll get an idea of what the problem is. To do effective collective work, certain qualities need to be in place: commitment, reliability, respect, also humility. We need to understand what we can and cannot do, when it's our place to take on a guiding role and when not, what we can teach and what we must learn. If we aren't able to do this without formal structures, we gotta bite the bullet and accept formal structures. Or, if you wanna turn that around: if we think that, as anarchists, we can never accept those requirements, even if it means confining ourselves to an insignificant social bubble, then anarchism stands for a moral high ground, not a political movement. It's our choice.

If some anarchists feel that they've been very good with vision, strategy, and organisational capacity, they're not necessarily wrong. So-called affinity groups have achieved amazing things. But running an infoshop, organising a protest, or doing skill-sharing in your neighbourhood is not on the same scale as overthrowing capital and the state. I understand that I might be aiming high, but I'm stubborn that way.

MW: I'm sure you're not alone in your frustration – in fact, as I see things, the broad terrain of radical politics has increasingly had enough with the anarchist line, and is moving towards more conventional forms of political organising – most obviously, there's been a renewed focus on the political party and union organising. If that's a reaction against the failure of anarchist strategy, the obvious question becomes, what could we do differently? One argument being made, unsurprisingly, is that the anarchist-inspired movements were bound to fail, that we need vertical organisations to move past the fragments of horizontal praxis. Others are looking for some kind of hybrid, accepting some level of vertical organisation, even accepting the political party, but tying them in some way to forums of direct democracy. Do you see examples of people adjusting, listening to the kinds of critiques you laid out, and finding a way forward that inspires you? And if not, what would you like to see happening?

GK: I think it has gone two ways. I hope I'm forgiven for the terminological shortcuts, but there's been both an 'authoritarian' and a 'reformist' turn. The authoritarian turn can be seen in the various new MLM organisations I already mentioned, which are often carried by people of my generation who formerly identified as anarchists or autonomists. The reformist turn is more what you are hinting at: people feel that to really make a difference you have to get involved in 'real politics' and its organisations, be it parties, unions, NGOs, or other well-established players. I understand the reasoning behind both turns, but I'd like people to be honest about

cal struggle. Notably, almost all of the historically most important radical theorists were not academics but revolutionaries, whether you look at Vladimir Lenin, Frantz Fanon, Abdullah Öcalan, or pretty much any well-known anarchist. (It might be no coincidence that the two best-known anarchists of the last fifty years, Noam Chomsky and David Graeber, were in academia, as times have been changing – for better or worse.)

Things can get tricky with self-proclaimed radicals in academia when they feel that others juxtapose 'academics' and 'activists'. 'Well, you don't know what we do!' is an answer I've heard fairly often. And it's true: I don't know what they do. But from the outside, the amount of papers written about radical action seems disproportionately higher than radical action itself. It also often seems that academia as an institution is sucking people in, no matter how radical their beliefs are. A simple example: In my experience, some of the people who are the worst to correspond with in the context of political action are academics. Emails and messages don't get answered, and, if they are, the answers are brief to the point of being irrelevant. I am told that academics receive hundreds of emails and messages a day and simply can't keep up. That makes sense. But it still means that it's difficult to organise with people who can't keep up with the most basic level of correspondence. This is what I mean by getting sucked in: in order to keep your place in the institution, you have to make priorities that aren't necessarily conducive to political action. You also accept a framework that's not necessarily conducive to anarchism (hierarchies tied into the work environment, grading, formalities, bureaucracy, etc.). I don't see self-proclaimed radicals in academia challenging this much, but, again, maybe I just miss it, and we should all work on better exchange between the inside and the outside in order to understand one another better. But I believe we need to agree that where Marx is right he is right: it's not enough to interpret the world, it's necessary to change it.

more grounded work, the day-to-day stuff which doesn't get the same level of attention, but which maybe embeds anarchist theory and practice in a deeper way. Some of this, as you say, might be in more mainstream contexts, but I think you can also see the influence of anarchist praxis in parts of, for example, the cooperative movement and other more 'friendly' spaces. One question for me, then, thinking with my academic hat on, is how we help make this work visible, and how we keep anarchism alive without – or until the next round of – mass mobilisations. I suppose my final question then is aimed more for the likely audience of this journal; moving forward, what would you like to see in terms of intellectual work? What can academics be doing now to keep at least something of the anarchist century alive?

GK: First of all, that's a clever way to link anarchist praxis and friendly spaces. I usually think that if anarchist spaces were friendly, we would have already made a big step forward. But that was not your question. Thinking about it, I might digress because your question leads me onto thin ice. Once upon a time, I consciously decided against an academic career and have since left that world pretty much to the ones in it. Seems like you can only lose speaking about it from the outside. Then again, I've been called 'overly diplomatic' before, so perhaps I can save my skin. The proof will be in the pudding.

Let's begin with the obvious: Universities are politically contested territories, and the more accomplices we have there, the better. It's important to have strong contestants in what we might have called the 'discursive battle' before there were good reasons to no longer use post-lingo. Furthermore, even if ninety percent of what's happening in social and human sciences is pretty meaningless, there is very important stuff happening, too. The 'culture wars' are no joke, and academics can have big political influence, both on the right and the left. Someone like Judith Butler has shaped the thinking of many people who have never even heard of her. Crucial, of course, is that political theory is developed alongside politi-

this. If you decide that party politics is the most promising way forward, you simply no longer believe in anarchism and a revolutionary approach. Terms such as 'radical reformism' or calling revolution 'a process rather than a rupture' are oxymorons that jumble political debate. It becomes very unclear where people actually stand when they only hold on to a radical identity for nostalgic reasons or their self-image alone. I guess the authoritarians are more honest, but maybe it's easier for them: their radical identity still seems credible, only that they substitute hammer and sickle for the circle-A.

Anyway, even if I might be critical of many aspects of anarchism, I have followed neither of the mentioned turns and don't plan to do so. I feel a strong need for revolutionary politics that no 'democratic socialism' can fulfill, and I believe that vanguardism is a dead end. That's what still makes me an anarchist.

Do I think that anarchism has a better answer than the authoritarians and the reformists as to how to overcome oppressive and exploitative structures? No. But I think anarchism provides a better basis to find such answers. In the end, they can only be found in collective action; our discussions about how to overcome oppressive and exploitative structures need to be tied to forms of political practice. That is one of the strengths of anarchism. Even if the concept of a 'diversity of tactics' is so vague that it easily becomes meaningless, there is nothing wrong with diversity. A revolutionary movement needs both effective forms of resistance and experiences in creating different forms of social, economic, and cultural relationships. Anarchism has a rich history in this respect, which we can draw on. But the forms of resistance and experiences need to be tied together in a collective effort to lay out a revolutionary path. The 'singularities' alone won't do; they will always be trumped by the complex webs of power that rule our lives.

I think there are quite a few anarchists with similar views. In the Nordic and German-speaking countries, where I observe the anarchist scenes most closely, 'organising as anarchists' has cer-

tainly become a much-discussed topic in recent years, with a number of concrete projects tied to it. These projects might, as of yet, be small and limited, but I don't think that's what matters. Since you're asking, yes, I would like to see more of them, but life's no bowl of cherries. Still, we've got some momentum, and it's up to us to make the most of it. Time will tell.

MW: Could you tell us a bit more about some of these concrete projects? And about the discussions that have led to them. We've both seen that a lot of people who share some of your critiques and concerns about anarchism's recent-past have gone on to accept the need for some levels of 'verticality' – whether that's political parties, or just more hierarchical organisations and networks. Certainly, I haven't seen much in the way of theoretical or empirical examples of moving beyond the praxis developed by the movement of movements, Occupy, and so on, without also moving beyond what you suggest are some pretty fundamental features of anarchism. It's also interesting to me that these conversations don't seem to be happening in many spaces. Maybe I'm too disconnected from the cutting-edge of anarchism! But I don't see any concerted efforts to critically assess the last few decades, and see what anarchism might look like moving forward.

GK: I don't think I'm connected to the cutting-edge of anarchism either. Is there one? What I do feel connected to are debates in the Nordic countries and the German-speaking world, and I do see some development there. (Maybe Corbynism has led to a particular situation in the UK, but that's for others to tell.) As I've said, the related projects are small and limited, but I can be more concrete.

In Germany, there are at least three projects that have been founded in recent years, which try to tackle organising from an anarchist perspective and without verticality. There is Die Plattform, which, not hard to guess, is a platformist organisation; there is anarchismus.de, an anarcho-communist project that brings together

tutions, but do they have to resemble a state, which is (in almost all definitions) associated with an authority over a particular territory, a monopoly on violence, exclusive rights to citizenship, and not just the institutionalisation of particular tasks but of political power overall? I don't think so, and I don't think that's what people take with them from an experience like the pandemic or the climate crisis. What people take with them is that 'we're all in this together' and that we need solutions for everybody. The kind of anarchism that refuses to even engage in finding such solutions because they consider the entire framework oppressive won't find many followers. But that's not the only kind of anarchism. At the risk of overexploiting the following examples, we see experiments with council structures fulfilling nation-state tasks without reproducing the nation state as such in Chiapas or Rojava. That's where the excitement begins. And, yes, you could throw many examples of mutual aid in there that appear in moments of crisis, but not only – there is still a lot of mutual aid in our daily lives as well. To only point at the shortcomings in Chiapas or Rojava in order to discredit these large-scale attempts right off the bat, is ludicrous. Building a new society is not like logging into the latest messaging service on your phone, which either works or doesn't work. It's a long-winded process, difficult, exhausting, and dirty, but, once again, life's no bowl of cherries. I refuse to believe that anarchism can't provide answers, but it requires hard, collective work to find them.

MW: Thanks Gabriel, there's a lot to think about there. Trying to sum up, I'm wondering whether there's an inevitable process which it might be useful to draw out, which relies on a level of dialectical or iterative shifts between mass movements and more dispersed, but perhaps more durable activity. The former, it seems to me, engage more people, and are far more visible, but also rely on a more simplistic analysis, which can feel more satisfying and rewarding – a more populist approach, I suppose. Then there's the

to sort out if we want to pose a bigger challenge to the powers that be.

Covid and the state: Again, I will focus on the regions I am most familiar with. In the Nordic countries, there haven't been huge social divides around the issue. There have been different approaches (Sweden remained much more open than its neighbours), but the strong trust in state institutions that characterises the Nordic countries meant that people were, with few exceptions, following the recommendations and rules of their respective governments. In Germany and Austria, it was very different. Here you had huge social divides. Remarkably, they cut right through traditional left/right categorisations: it was right-wing forces that challenged state authority, while the left rallied around the state. (To a large degree that was a reaction to the response by the right, which, sadly, proves that much of leftist politics today has become a knee-jerk reaction to whatever is happening on the right. Very little own agenda remains.) To their credit, some anarchists in the German-speaking countries tried to avoid the 'either you're with the state or with the far right' trap in an attempt to develop positions of their own, but it's hard in an environment where you're easily accused of peddling conspiracy theories or aiding right-wing nutters, especially when it's indeed all too easy to feed trolls you don't wanna feed. I suppose it's the kind of debate you call 'toxic' today. Anyway, I'm not sure if the state has come out stronger from the pandemic, it has also made a lot of enemies – but, yes, it seemingly has made plenty of new friends on the left, anarchists included.

But what is the state? The smartest of our political scientists still have no common definition. I think what the pandemic has shown is that a certain level of centralisation is needed to administer the mass societies we live in. But the pandemic is not alone in showing that. There is, of course, the climate crisis, but it's enough to look at many of the daily tasks we need to take care of collectively: food production and distribution, health services, transport, energy, and so on. All of them require somewhat centralised insti-

traditional community work (social centres, info tables, and the like) with Generation Z social media savvy; and there is Perspektive Selbstverwaltung, which straddles the boundaries between left communism and anarchism. I'm not in a position to evaluate and compare these projects. Needless to say, each of them encounters problems, they do not all see eye to eye, and they are confronted with a fair share of criticism. But they indicate that people are seeking for alternatives both to the Left Party, Maoist groups like Jugendwiderstand (now dissolved but quite popular for a few years), and the insurrectionist milieu. I would also think that the rise of the anarcho-syndicalist FAU in recent years, particularly in Berlin, is connected to this.

With respect to the Nordic countries, the evidence I have is more circumstantial. A discussion at the Stockholm Anarchist Bookfair a few years ago on the question of 'Why is there no anarchist organisation in Sweden?' was very well attended, and a popular anarchist podcast wanted to do a programme on the topic before concerted far-right efforts helped to shut it down. There is also a new 'Anarchist Association' in Stockholm – at the moment, they mainly do book presentations and such, but the intention is to facilitate anarchist organising. There are also pronounced anarchist factions in the SAC, the second-biggest syndicalist organisation in Europe after the CGT in Spain.

If we look at Sweden's neighbours, my text 'Revolution Is More Than a Word: 23 Theses on Anarchism', which includes some of the ideas we are discussing here, has been translated into both Danish and Finnish, and, from what I hear, there've been discussion groups. Who knows what this will (and can) lead to, but to me it's an indication that an increasing number of people in the anarchist milieu reflect on anarchist forms of organising.

I don't know if the Angry Workers would count as an example in the UK. Their organising efforts clearly have anarchist dimensions, even if they call themselves left communists.

The tendencies are there, the mass movements are not. We're back at strategy.

MW: That's a really interesting overview – and I think the summary says a great deal; as you say, the tendencies are there – but we do have to *look* for them. I think it's fair to say, though, that there's no longer a mass anarchist-inspired movement, and certainly nothing which, unlike in the recent past, was unavoidable, even to the mainstream. I'd already come across your 23 Theses on Anarchism, and I remember thinking – finally, some one's acknowledging what's happening. For me, that's been the most curious feature of the last decade – the failure to acknowledge what's happened to the anarchist century.

In the UK, there was a huge amount of action, which erupted during Covid, providing some amazing examples of mutual aid. Lots of that drew on people's experience of other forms of anarchist organising, and used some of the infrastructure, like social centres, to great effect. As always, when the state fails, people are more than capable of stepping in at a local level. But I think the wider dynamic of the pandemic helped cement some people's feelings that anarchism has its limits, and that states are needed for moments like this, if nothing else. Already, people have forgotten the mutual aid that kept people fed when the state and market couldn't keep up, but no one will forget the creation of vaccines, the nation-wide testing programmes, even the power of the state to enforce lockdowns. I'm not saying the non-anarchist left haven't been critical of the state's role in dealing with this, but I think it's given weight to some political positions more than others. The obvious parallel here is climate change, and the perceived need for something as powerful and far-reaching as the state to deal with it. And I've certainly heard people call-back to Covid to strengthen that claim. I'm assuming you've heard similar arguments, even from people who otherwise reject the state. My sense is more and more people are coming round to this position. What would you say to those

people who are generally sympathetic to anarchism, but who are becoming increasingly open to engaging with the state?

GK: Wow, there's a lot in there.

I've already noted that the anarchist century has been rather disappointing so far. The earth is dying, neoliberalism is firmly in place, and if there is any significant resistance to it, it comes from the far right rather than the far left. The moment that was there when David Graeber and Andrej Grubacic wrote their essay of the same name in 2004 is gone. There are external reasons for this (9/ 11, state repression, globalised capitalism, and others) as well as internal ones (lack of common vision and strategy). So, you're right: there are no anarchist-inspired mass movements. Why is there a failure to acknowledge that? I don't know. Partly, you want to believe you are more significant than what you are (which, let's face it, is human and also a requirement to stay motivated), and partly because the sub cultural comfort zone is more important to a number of anarchists than political analysis (which is also human, I'm not out to bash 'lifestylism', that's a tired debate).

None of this is to say that anarchism is without influence. In fact, the influence that anarchism has is often grossly underestimated. Look at three topics that are part of the liberal mainstream today: veganism, gender diversity, and (allow me the shorthand) identity politics. A couple of decades ago, these topics were only discussed in marginalised circles, in which anarchists played a key role. If you go back in history, you'll find many more such examples, from the eight-hour workday to abortion rights to anti-authoritarian education. The problem is that while being incorporated into the liberal mainstream, the topics lose revolutionary potential. It's a worthwhile discussion whether that's because there never was much revolutionary potential to begin with, or whether the process of liberal adaptation kills it, but let's save that for another time. Fact is that anarchists do have an influence, it's just not in a revolutionary manner. This is one of the key questions we need