

(Anti-)politics and communist anarchism

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When I decided five years ago to devote myself comprehensively to the political theory of anarchism, it seemed obvious to me to explore the basic concepts of this pluralistic socialist current. For in anarchism there is an independent theoretical thinking, which must necessarily be understood in connection with the anarchist ethics and its ways of life as well as anarchist ideas of organization. Therefore I asked myself the questions: What do anarchists actually understand by „politics“? How do anarchists behave towards „politics“? And: Can there be an anarchist „politics“ and what would be its criteria? The concept „(anti-)politics“ expresses that it is a field of tension caused by the existing order of domination, in which anarchists always act in contradiction.

Statehood as an organized political relationship of domination

It is striking that in all anarchist currents there is a fundamental critique of policy-making. This relates to government policy, the state bureaucracy, parliamentarism, and the party politics. But it also refers to the political logic and mode of organization in a broader sense. For what we commonly understand and associate with „politics“ is not a neutral terrain. Rather, the activities of social movements that tend to be autonomous and self-organized are often attributed to and often appropriated by the state. „Politics“ takes the form of political rule in liberal-democratic forms of society. This means that statehood emerged as a relationship of domination between those who govern and those who are governed, and this is carried into potentially all areas of society.

It is in the logic of the state to regulate, control, sanction and capture all social spheres. If a „private sphere“ is constructed through it, then this is just as little in itself exempt from state domination as „the“ economy cannot really be thought of separately from the state and „leisure“, the flip side of wage labor. Statehood can be thought analogously to capitalism, the economic relation of domination, patriarchy in gender relations, and anthropocentrism in the societal relation to nature.

As a relation of domination, it potentially reaches into all social spheres, but it is not total. Alongside it exist suppressed and repressed forms of how people can organize themselves. They do so even when statehood is the dominant political relation of domination. On most activities that take place on the political level, the state claims a monopoly or at least wants to control and regulate them. Conversely, when most people think of „politics,“ they very quickly associate it with statist structures and logic - because their consciousness is shaped by the ideology of the existing ruling order.

Radical democracy or skepticism towards politics?

If anarchists reject the nationalization of politics, one possibility would be to oppose it with a kind of self-organized and autonomous politics „from below“. A „radical democracy“ or „grass-roots democracy“ is to be opposed to state rule, that claims itself wrongly to be „democratic“. If you like, these approaches are about reclaiming the concept of „politics“ and thus redefining it. Obviously, many anarchists are always concerned with what is going on in „politics“ and also try to intervene in it. This happens when they register rallies, participate in demos, are possibly active in associations, perhaps also talk to politicians or deal with politics in order to be able to criticize and delegitimize it.

With the topic connected is the question, which starting points exist for the organization of a libertarian-socialist form of society. Even if there are plausible arguments for this radical-democratic view, I decided to use another concept of politics. I describe it as (ultra-)realist, governmental and conflict-oriented. By this I mean to express that the political field is always about power struggles and that those involved in it have extremely unequal power resources. This means, as I said before, that politics is never neutral in the existing order of rule. Rather, its conditions are already shaped by political domination.

In other words: In politics as it appears to us today, there is little to almost no room for anarchist positions. If they bring social-revolutionary aspirations into it, they are marginalized and demonized. If anarchists try to work pragmatically for gradual improvements, they are ignored or hemmed in. These effects should not be underestimated, as is the case with numerous leftists who found the hundredth political sect, join political parties despite their discomfort, or despair of politics and want to be effective only culturally or with their personal lifestyle, for example. From an anarchist perspective, it is worthwhile to remain continually skeptical about making politics.

Reasons for the discomfort with politics

Incidentally, it was, among other things, the dispute over the concept of politics itself that gave rise to anarchism as an independent current. In the mid-19th century, the grassroots socialist movement became politicized. This happened, first, through the appropriation of its demands by bringing forth a state social policy. Second, social democratic and communist party politicians sought to impose their own claims to leadership and rule through political reform or political revolution. Third, self-organized, autonomous movements and self-governed areas were subjected to brutal repression in the course of the enforcement of the modern nation-state. Therefore, they took on organizational forms that were legalized in the bourgeois order of rule and were thus assigned to it. Anarchists resisted this politicization of socialism by emphasizing the organizational principles of autonomy, decentralization, federalism, and voluntarism, and by working for comprehensive social change through social revolution.

In addition to the historical, there are other reasons why it is important to be skeptical about policy-making from an anarchist perspective. This concerns the already mentioned observation that tendentially self-organized autonomous social movements are again and again appropriated by or assigned to state politics. This can also be seen, for example, with Fridays for Future: Although FFF was relatively successful as a movement, there were efforts within it to found its own parties, to see itself as a vanguard organization of the Greens, and to appeal permanently to those in political power. Numerous leftists also keep formulating demands to "the" politicians, although they do not have the power base to enforce them. We know this from demonstrations, where the participants already have the feeling that they have made a contribution to emancipation when they walk through the streets with others. A rally is meaningful when similarly minded people can meet at it, exchange ideas, feel strong together, convince others or go into confrontation. But taken on its own, it does not generate any serious pressure for those in power.

A pluralistic anarchism

Within anarchism there are very different traditions, perspectives, viewpoints, experiences and practices. Because of this, there are ongoing and profound controversies and disputes among anarchists. Many positions of people who call themselves anarchists may annoy or even provoke other anarchists. Since they are about something, it should also not be pretended that all views can stand side by side on an equal footing. Because then they remain arbitrary opinions, which is not sufficient to practice fundamental social criticism and to build functioning alternatives. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that anarchism is pluralistic. It may and should be, because if anarchism were homogenized and centralized by political leadership, it would ultimately be just one political current among others. But anarchism is qualitatively different from other socialist and also radical left approaches. And this difference is again expressed in the understanding of politics.

Individualist anarchists criticize political rule primarily because it restricts the self-determination of individuals, which they oppose. The needs and desires of individuals can only be defined by themselves. They do not want their interests to be represented by anyone. Mutualist approaches aim at self-organization, e.g. of neighborhoods, regional economic circuits, tenements, etc., and advocate cooperatives and collective enterprises. In anarch@-syndicalism, politics is clearly opposed to organization and struggle in the economic sphere. Instead of achieving political reforms through the state, the aim is to assert interests directly against the owners of capital and to use syndicates to lay the organizational foundation for the self-management of a libertarian-socialist form of society. Communitarian anarchism is about sharing life with like-minded people and - beyond politics - experimentally anticipating the coming society in alternative scenes or commune projects.

In contrast, anarchist insurrectionism assumes that anarchists should not produce any visions. Rather, any form of domination must be permanently attacked, without the need for "political" alternative narratives. The insurrectionist tendency emerged, so to speak, as an inversion of communist anarchism. It developed, in my interpretation, as a result of the experience of the failure of anarchist claims, disillusionment with the failure of social revolution, and the brutal repression of libertarian socialist movements.

The traditions, perspectives, and practices of the various anarchist tendencies are initially interesting in their own right. We should not see their categorization too narrowly, because in anarchist scenes they mix in different manifestations. This is not bad, but can be very enriching. As different as anarchists are and think, they have one thing in common in their understanding of politics. And this leads to the striving for autonomy, i.e. the rejection of domination with the simultaneous realization of egalitarian, libertarian and solidary relationships and institutions.

The political void in anarchism

However, the radical critique of politics and its rejection in anarchism as a whole also creates two theoretical problems. First, if the political terrain is completely neglected, anarchist approaches tend to become ends in themselves. Revolt can become an aimless end in itself, which can be used to satisfy needs for rebellion, but which remains an anti-reflex and cannot fundamentally overcome domination. The autonomous center can only be subcultural and a house project

becomes a nicer way of living in the gentrified neighborhood. Grassroots unionism is instrumentalized by political groups or masks its internal contradictions. Practices of mutual aid stop at social misery management or serving one's own clientele. Subversive individuals merely revolve around their self-discovery.

Second, there is the question of how a libertarian-socialist form of society can be organized politically. How are self-organized communities formed and how are they interconnected? How are consensuses formed, how are decisions made and supported by as many as possible? If anarchists want to do justice to their own demands and prefiguratively create alternative realities, these questions do not arise conclusively and in the sense of an abstract draft of a new social order. Rather, they are essential foundations for developing emancipatory social movements and alternative structures. Anarch@-communists in particular deal with these questions. Therefore, I will now illuminate the (anti-)politics in communist anarchism. However, I would like to say in advance that the problem with politics cannot really be solved with it either.

The (anti-)politics of anarch@-communist groups

Even within communist anarchism, various statements are made about politics. For example, Johann Most makes a biting criticism of politicking, and Joseph Peukert also rejects "politics" in a rather flat way. In contrast, Pyotr Kropotkin wonders how libertarian-socialist political relations can be conceived alongside and in opposition to the political domination relationship of the state. Communism is the alternative economic relationship, while anarchy is supposed to be the mode for the political relationship with little domination. According to this conception, the federation of autonomous decentralized communes is the political organizational model of the desirable form of society. The fact that different communities can organize themselves without becoming exclusive, homogeneous and hierarchical is based on historical experiences, which form the starting point for the vision of a libertarian-socialist form of society. Anarchists can describe such a concrete/real utopia without setting it in stone or believing in a master plan that cannot exist. They also need such a vision if they want to point out alternatives to the existing order of rule as a whole and if they want to realize their ideas not only in scenes and projects.

Because communist anarchism is about the social revolutionization of the entire form of society, it emphasizes propaganda, consciousness-raising and organizing more than other anarchist tendencies. Even though there is a pronounced skepticism about politicking in anarch@-communism, it is also the most "political" of the anarchist tendencies in its organizations. Among other things, anarch@-communists refer to left-wing political groups and compare themselves with them, accept gradual differences in politicians, want to show social movements a certain direction, can imagine decisions through elections under certain circumstances, etc. Communist anarchism enters political territory with these basic assumptions, even if it does not involve state politics. But if statehood is understood in a broader sense as a political relationship of domination, a contradiction arises here. For how does anarch@-communist autonomous politics then really differ, for example, from the marxist approach, with which political domination is also criticized, but for which very reason reformist and/or revolutionary politics is pursued?

Accusations against acting on political terrain

Certain anarchists therefore raise the accusation that communist anarchism is basically just another leftist current. Its activists would consider themselves anti-authoritarian, but ultimately underestimate the fact that the social model they strive for would be at best a better order of rule, but would not amount to the abolition of rule at all. And at all with anarch@communism the political logic would not be left finally, thus still in categories from the mindset of the ruling order.

I consider these accusations to be false, because I am convinced that desirable alternative social relations already exist in the here and now, and that we can extend them and work for them. Instead of the ultimate fiction of a "liberated society," we should align ourselves with a vision for a credible and feasible concrete utopia, orient our struggles around it, and seek to become more as a radical minority. In my view, people are social animals who can only develop and determine themselves as individually special persons in society. And institutions are not structures of domination per se, but it is a social fact that people develop institutions - that is why their design matters.

Nevertheless, these accusations contain anarchistic truths based on experience. First, bad experiences have always been made with great social designs. This is especially true when humanistic claims have been used to dictate to others what would be right for them. Second, there is always a danger in larger and formal organizations that bureaucratic hierarchies will develop within them. This is also true of a libertarian-socialist form of society, in which domination will realistically not be completely abolished. Third, this brings us back to the basic problem with politics in general. If it is a terrain formed by domination, anarchists cannot gain anything for their actual goals. Therefore, they should spend their time otherwise than somehow referring to politics, dealing with politics or acting politically. Communist anarchists are aware of these problems and have also tried to find answers to them.

Becoming capable of acting in contradictions

This brings me back to my initial questions: What do anarchists understand by politics? How do they deal with it? Can there be an autonomous politics that really goes beyond the framework of the political relationship of domination and is not taken over by the state? Unfortunately, I cannot answer these questions conclusively. This is due to my undogmatic approach, with which I consider further questions and discussions more important than giving definitive answers or formulating fixed definitions. Therefore, I would like to share my questions with anyone who is interested and encourage them to think about them themselves.

I believe it is true that there is a theoretical contradiction in anarchist communism when, on the one hand, it is used to enter the political field while, on the other hand, the anarchist critique of policy-making is present in it. Apart from the fact that this contradiction is also present in other anarchist tendencies, although it is often dogmatically or romantically ignored and talked away, the question remains whether this is such a bad thing. For, that this contradiction exists is not due to an inadequacy of anarchist thought. Rather, it arises from the framework conditions of a certain order of domination, alongside and beyond which there are also desirable social conditions to which anarchists can positively relate.

In short, domination and freedom exist simultaneously. If this wouldn't be the case, anarchists wouldn't need to fight for anything else at all. This is true even if they were to devote themselves primarily to the destruction of structures of domination. If no desirable changes were possible at all, anarchists would either remain just any scene, riddled with romantic and dogmatic phrases. Or they would merge into political groups and make politics for a certain clientele. Or they would fall into nihilism, which is an absurd conclusion. Even if these signs of decay are present, I am convinced that people can in principle be empowered to determine their own lives and fight for a libertarian socialist society that will continue to be challenged and developed through anarchy.

Ultimately, it should be about the question of how anarchists can become capable of acting in contradictions in order to blow up the framework of the order of domination, to create self-organized communities and to establish egalitarian, libertarian and solidary relationships and institutions in them. Whether and how this can succeed would have to be discussed elsewhere on the basis of particular examples. For anarch@-communism, the thinking and actions of Emma Goldman and Errico Malatesta can inspire. In their biographies and texts I see a continuous commitment to bring different marginalized, exploited and oppressed groups into a common social-revolutionary project. In doing so, they connect different fields of struggle, attempt to mediate divergent anarchist viewpoints, and take clear positions themselves on specific issues.

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