(Anti)Politics in Individualist Anarchism

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Contents

In the following text, I explore the question of the relationship between individualist variants of anarchism and politics. In a previous article (see CONTRASTE No. 459, December 2022), I considered (anti-)politics in mutualist and communitarian anarchism, while elsewhere, I illuminated the paradoxical relationship to politics in anarchist communism and syndicalism. I continue these remarks in order to make available some of the results of my PhD on the political theory of anarchism.

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Along with social democracy and party communism, anarchism is one of the main currents of socialism. While the former refer to the state with the strategies of political reform and political revolution, anarchists criticize action in the political field and the reference to political logics, procedures and organizations. In contrast, acting in the form of direct action, personal convictions and one's own way of life appears to be much more meaningful, effective and emancipatory. In terms of the history of ideas, anarchism adapted elements of liberal theories. This is evident in its emphasis on individuality and subjectivity, as well as in theoretical concepts of "free agreement" and "self-organization," the organizing principle of "voluntarism," and in the reference to free will, self-responsibility, "self-ownership," and the sovereignty of individuals to be achieved. Even if it bothers some communist and syndicalist anarchists, individualist aspects are essential components of anarchist thought and action as a whole.

Starting Points and Strands of Individual Anarchism

There is not "the" individualist anarchism per se, but different strands. In my opinion, we can distinguish between Enlightenment rationalism (starting with William Godwin), egoism (starting with Max Stirner, Émile Armand and Renzo Novatore), transcendentalism (e.g. Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Lev Tolstoy or Simone Weil) and ultra-liberalism (Benjamin Tucker or John Henry Mackay). In addition, even proven communist anarchists such as Emma Goldman or Errico Malatesta occasionally took individualist positions when warning against collectivist egalitarianism or partisan obedience and usurpation of authority.

The liberation of the individual is an essential orientation of all anarchists, as the early anarch@ communist Carlo Cafiero noted already in 1880. What characterizes individual anarchists, however, is the importance they ascribe to the liberation and empowerment of individuals in the here and now, and the recognition that emancipation must be concretely experienced in the lives of individuals in order to count for anything. "Freedom" therefore cannot be achieved solely by creating the social conditions for self-determined living, nor does it consist primarily in the detached self-realization of isolated individuals. Rather, it is measured by the possibility of critique and transgression of any constraints, norms and hierarchies, which can always arise in collectives. This is what Daniel Loick calls "aesthetic freedom" in his introductory volume, but it was actually already addressed by Michael Bakunin in 1882.

It is impossible to imagine anarchism as a whole without individualistic aspects. This is also evident in the fact that issues such as diversity and self-determination in gender identity and sexual desire are relevant in our time. Likewise, individualism plays a role in strategic questions about how to inspire and motivate individuals for anarchist projects, as well as in ethical considerations about how one can and should live according to anarchist ideas in a world full of domination. If anarchists want to contribute to the understanding, critique and further develop-

ment of the current form of society, it is necessary to understand how they can describe and productively deal with the tension between collectivity and individuality.

Mass society and pseudo-individualism

Let us go back a step to the emergence of the anarchist movement around the middle of the 19th century. Parallel to the enforcement of the capitalist economic system, the model of the patriarchal nuclear family, the construction of "races" in the course of colonization and enslavement as well as the systematic domination of nature, the modern nation-state spread. Nation-state political rule regulated, controlled, and governed more and more social spheres. Serfs, peasants and artisans became „citizens" and inhabitants formed a „population" that was statistically recorded and bureaucratically administered. At the same time, the dawn of modernity is a highly ambivalent affair. Innovations in agriculture, health care, machine work, education and productivity made a relative prosperity possible for a part of the people and thus formed - connected with an conception of man changed by humanism - the prerequisite for the self-determined, individual organization of life.

The individual-anarchist criticism of this is firstly that self-determination and self-development were not equally possible for everyone and secondly that bourgeois individualism was a pseudo-individualism - individuals were only allowed to develop their particularity to the extent that they did not attack or irritate traditional or newly introduced conventions and hegemonic ideas. This concerns, for example, sexual morality and non-sessile lifestyles, bourgeois etiquette, and certain boundaries between what should be kept private and what should be shown publicly.

It is no contradiction that this pseudo-individualization goes hand in hand with the rise of mass society. Through factory work, standardized living quarters and forms of consumption, state schools, and military service, proletarianized social groups were made equal and individual particularities became irrelevant. This homogenization, as well as the displacement of pre-modern ways of life in favor of national mythology, served to carve out a supposedly coherent "people." Standardized industrial production displaced handicrafts and industry, monocultural agriculture regionally adapted cultivation methods. With the culture-industry, forms of expression, role patterns and narratives suitable for the masses were standardized.

Far be it from me to idealize pre-modern pasts with this description or to use them as a romanticized projection surface of a supposedly ideal and reconciled world contrary to modern forms of society - however cold, destructive, isolating and presumptuous the latter actually is. It is much more important to gain orientation about where we want to go together - and how we can already live and fight here and now to realize this. The fact that all individuals can determine, shape and develop their own lives should continue to be the vanishing line of emancipatory social change. For emancipation only succeeds where it can be experienced in the lives of tangible individuals and is carried out by them. Social freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but a way of being whose conditions we can create and expand.

Politics as leveling of the individual and „politics of the first person"

Individualistic anarchists also want to change social conditions. They do this starting with their own lives and their immediate environment, because this is the horizon in which they can become effective and thus also experience self-efficacy. This raises the question of what relationship to politics can be derived from this.

The fundamental criticism is that political action is appropriated by the modern state, monopolized and often assigned to it. In representative, parliamentary democracy, only an extremely mediated representation of individual wishes and aspirations is possible. Majority decisions lead to minorities and thus also the demands of individuals being systematically ignored. The bureaucracy of the modern state treats its citizens not as individual human beings with specific desires, needs, abilities, and lifestyles, but as a population to be counted and calculated, just as they are regarded by capitalist enterprises as a workforce with human capital. Interests of individuals need to be aggregated and articulated in a technical language in order to be considered in political processes and procedures. Politics, then, in a form of society dominated by the political rule of the modern nation-state, necessarily leads to the alienation of individuals from their immediate, own desires, needs, interests, ideas, and social relations. This applies equally to state institutions and to political parties.

The state is not interested in what people think and do in their private lives, whereat it defines where the boundary between private and public is drawn. Liberals emphasize this boundary, but also justify the necessity of the state, which establishes the bourgeois mode of existence - linked to the bourgeois legal system and private property. Anarchists want to extend the self-determination of the individual against nationalized politics, but in doing so they also overstep the boundaries of what is privatized and publicized. The slogan of the second wave of the women's movement "The private is political" clarifies what is at stake: It should not be a private matter whether, for example, men patronize or command their partners, because the patriarchal nuclear family is a domination-shaped institution that must be criticized and overcome. This happens at various levels, including that of social relations. Feminist movements were successful because they addressed living conditions and behaviors that had been relegated to the private sphere, created alternatives to them, and directly changed their environment.

However, the emphasis in the various strands of individualist anarchism with regard to the understanding of politics is set differently.

Starting from Stirner, there is a fundamental critique of politics. It is assumed that politics always subjugates, absorbs and levels the individuals, who should instead simply follow their needs and passions directly. Therefore, it is also necessary to be fundamentally skeptical of socialist politics, which would also disregard the individual. As a contemporary thinker, the French philosopher Michel Onfray, for example, stands in this tradition, which paradoxically slides into an anti-liberal, cross-front populist tendency.

Thoreau, on the other hand, formulates an attitude of pronounced indifference to state policy, criticizing it precisely because it intervenes in the affairs of individuals. If you will, politics should be kept as far away as possible, but conversely, this by no means precludes taking care of one's community and, connected with that, consciously shaping one's own life. From this approach,

above all, concepts of civil disobedience were derived, which refer to a higher "justice" and thus to an imaginary social contract, which is broken by nationalized politics.

The latter is also the case with Godwin. It is in his line that an individualist anarchist politics can most readily be formulated. For example, he rejects the state and church school system, but argues that a public school system is needed for people to emancipate themselves. Thus, as a matter of course, he assumes that it is not the task of the state to create or administer social institutions, because the state would not enable self-determination for individuals.

Tucker mixes aspects of various anarchist thinkers and advocates a variant of socialism that is primarily cooperative and mutualist in orientation. This could best enable the self-determination of individuals, who should join together directly in a voluntary agreement. For this, however, the tendency toward monopolization and state regulation would have to be countered.

What all strands of individualist anarchism have in common is that they criticize the leveling of individuals through nationalized politics and do not consider the political institutions and procedures of the modern state to be suitable for producing self-determined individuals. Therefore, they also oppose authoritarian communism and are skeptical of large-scale social designs and concepts of revolution. In addition, they criticize the ideology of political rule, which is produced, for example, by schools, historiography, state media and national celebrations. While these approaches are related to left-liberal understandings, on closer inspection they prove to be independent perspectives from which different positions in dealing with politics can be identified. While Stirner places himself squarely on the anti-political pole and Thoreau advocates indifference, Godwin and Tucker seek to free politics from its nationalization and place it in the service of individual self-determination.

From liberation to self-determination of the individual

From the point of view of the history of ideas and political theory, anarchist individualism, as described above, cannot be equated with the idea that individuals should just "do their own thing", that no one should "interfere" their thoughts and actions, that they should only look after their own happiness or even advocate the right of the strongest. In other words, individual anarchism is to be distinguished from bourgeois-liberal individualism and its intensification in the rage-bourgeois-right "libertarianism" or so-called "anarcho-capitalism". Therefore, the criticism of Marxists, Leninists and many communist and syndicalist anarchists against advocates of individualist anarchism is not correct.

From individual anarchism follows neither an endorsement of the capitalist economy, nor a right of the strongest, nor even necessarily the disorganization of social movements. On the contrary, it is argued that the modern state, capitalism and patriarchy do not allow or tolerate genuine individualization in the anarchist sense, and that this must therefore be expanded against the relations of domination. The emphasis on the individual and her/his/its self-responsibility can contribute precisely to the promotion of an ethical life in which people take responsibility for each other, understand each other, support each other and want to grow together. Finally, it strengthens groups in social movements precisely when individual views and positions are heard and respected. It is precisely through this that individuals in particular can voluntarily relate to a collectivity in which they are not ignored or incorporated.

At the same time, however, it is also true that we live in a form of society which, even in the 21st century, is extensively characterized by pseudo-individualization and mass society. The digitalization and acceleration of life has even exacerbated both complementary phenomena: contemporary people often feel a compulsion to present themselves on social media, to highlight their supposed peculiarities and tastes, or even to overemphasize their personal concerns. At the same time, they are manipulated, whipped up and appropriated, especially by right-wing populist actors. These have no interest whatsoever in their real self-determination, but on the contrary are directed against it; let's look at the debates about abortion, for example.

Such conditions understandably also affect the organization of social movements: Those in a group who permanently insist on asserting their own views, who are chronically offended and believe they will never be heard, understood or respected, can hardly form lasting and deep alliances with others. Those whose worries and aspirations permanently revolve only around themselves will not understand the need to change the circumstances that make it difficult for us to find a positive and authentic relationship to our self. Those who fall for the neoliberal promise of happiness and seek short-term kicks in the addiction to experience and the hankering for attention - even if it is in the consumption of alternative subcultures - will not only just miss out on happiness, but will also be unable to develop a rebellious attitude. It is precisely in relation to these issues that individualist-anarchist reflections can inspire, if they are understood as independent contributions. For this, however, it is necessary to move from the individualistic anti-reflex to real self-determination, which is sometimes a fine line. In this respect, individualist anarchism stands as the starting point of the emergence of anarchism, but it can also represent its decline.

Conclusion for individual-anarchist (anti-)politics

In terms of politics, this means first of all: to start to change things with oneself and one's own environment. This is where we know ourselves and where we experience the self-efficacy that is crucial for turning our own lives as a whole into the change we want to see in the world. To do this, we don't need to pontificate about revolutions or claim that the conditions for radical and emancipatory change are not there - because they always are or never will be.

In organizational terms, secondly, this means organizing on the basis of tangible social relations wherever possible. This does not mean being friends with all comrades, but developing affinities with them. It is therefore a matter of actively shaping relationships according to one's own demands, of communicating sensibly, and of treating each other with respect. Even large social movements are only as strong as the individuals in them directly unite, trust and cooperate with each other - which does not appear from nowhere, but can be actively encouraged.

Third, a skepticism about policy-making can be derived from individualist anarchism, which is quite appropriate and can be well justified. Actions are not only "successful" if they can be used to exert pressure on the state so that it feels compelled to introduce reforms. Direct actions speak for themselves and have immediate effects on the things we want to criticize and change. This requires that individuals act actively, voluntarily, reflectively and consciously, i.e. self-determined. This anticipates, i.e. already practices, what anarchists as a whole are striving for: A form of society in which all people have the conditions to determine and shape their lives themselves - which also includes that they can and should take responsibility for themselves. Whether the

resulting action is then called "political" or not is unimportant. The crucial thing is to move away from the nationalized mode of political action.

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