

Feminism and Anarchism: Towards a Politics of Engagement

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Thinking through the possible relationships between feminisms and anarchisms involves a commitment to analysing the similarities and differences between these two emancipatory political frameworks and identifying what insights each movement could offer the other. That task is, of course, beyond the scope of any article or book. It involves a dynamic series of dialogues where issues are debated and reformed depending upon different contexts, a process which recognises that “theory” and “practice” are not separate activities but interdependent and evolving forms of knowledge.

This paper is a contribution to that process and is specifically my response to the anarchist “Visions of Freedom” conference in Sydney 1995. That conference left me extremely angry and frustrated at the exclusion and ignorance of feminist knowledges within the general conference proceedings. This was particularly bewildering given that there were clearly many people attending the conference committed to critical political theory and feminist views. What this disparity highlights is that there is very much a dominant brand of anarchism which is never clearly articulated and which is hostile to the insights and challenges of (at least) feminist theory. During the conference’s plenary session, I delivered a condemnatory feminist critique of this dominant form of anarchism. This paper is an attempt to articulate more clearly that critique and will hopefully serve to pry open spaces for a range of political debates, which anarchism so clearly lacks and so desperately needs.

A Sketch of Feminist Political Theory

Revolutionary feminism is an analytical framework and movement committed to dismantling the institutions which politically, economically, sexually and psychically oppress all women. Revolutionary feminism recognises that women are not all the same and that a uniform experience of women’s oppression is illusory. Rather, oppression on the grounds of sex operates differently according to a woman’s race, class and sexuality, and if the oppression of all women is to cease, then the interconnected structures of patriarchy, transnational capitalism and Western imperialism must be fought against equally. Feminism’s most significant contribution to political theory is the recognition that political oppression does not only operate in the so-called “public sphere” of paid work and government, but thrives within the so-called “private” sphere of pleasure, personal life and family.

Politicising the “private” has had important implications for revolutionary political theory. Issues such as personal relations, sexual violence, housework, the preparation of food and childcare have become primary sites of political struggle rather than assumed supports for “real” political work. Consequentially, political theories which see the eradication of “real” social ills occurring primarily via the big-bang apocalypse of “the revolution” are revealed as anti-feminist. Although drastic social change through a a political and economic revolution is essential, it is only one moment in a continuum of political action aimed at changing the status quo. The need to ameliorate oppressive social structures now, by providing state funded women’s refuges or community childcare for example, is not a poor relation to a revolutionary process but an essential part of that process. If microscopic and macroscopic social change do not develop equally, then most women will neither have the time, ability or even be alive to participate. Any subsequent revolutionary political structure will be steeped in sexism and the revolution against patriarchy will fail.

A Sketch of Anarchist Political Principles

Feminist interest in anarchism has been aroused by the traditional principles of anarchist political theory. Of most significance is that rather than focussing on one specific authoritarian structure (such as capitalism), anarchism identifies authoritarian structures in general as the key instrument of oppression. This allows the possibility that equal recognition can be granted to the different forms of oppression which specific authoritarian systems create. Equal recognition of different oppressions avoids socialism's premise that capitalist class relations are the ultimate form of oppression through which all other oppressive forces are filtered. It is impossible to understand, and therefore change, the complexities of women's oppression (or racial, homosexual oppression) if class and capitalism are ultimately seen as the origins of injustice. A feminist relationship to anarchism would mean exploring authoritarian structures as fundamental to women's oppression and an anarchist relationship to feminism would mean recognising that patriarchy is a paradigmatic example of authoritarian structures.

Anarchism's refusal to adopt authoritarian means to achieve non-authoritarian ends recognises that revolutionary change is a continuous process. Revolutionary society has to begin being forged today if it is to benefit the majority and not merely empower the minority in a vanguardist party. This parallels feminism's focus on politicising the "private" and "personal" spheres and opens up spaces for debate of the possibilities and limitations of both theories.

Finally, the principle of non-hierarchical organisation reflects the feminist insight that current social, political and economic hierarchies are gendered (as well as race and sexuality determined), in that they overtly and subtly reproduce patterns of domination which oppress women. Non-hierarchical and decentralised organisation creates the possibility of allowing differently oppressed social groups to engage in a productive manner. The form that an effective non-hierarchical organisation would take is extremely complex to think through. I will not attempt to do this here (Rob Sparrow's paper in this collection provides a model with which to begin working) except insofar as to say that anarchist theory should not aim to assimilate feminist political theory. Assimilation policies only ever reduce the specificities of different oppressions to the specificities of the dominant group.

Some General Thoughts on Prevalent Forms of Anarchism

Although the above sketch of the similarities between anarchism and feminism presents a very promising picture, my experiences in the past eight years have overwhelmingly been of anarchism trailing the baggage of an extremely limiting split personality. There are political activists who claim anarchism and who are very committed to their politics, political theory and political action. On the other hand there are many people who claim anarchism, or more simply the anarchist symbol A, as a fashionable adjunct to their oh-so-alternative "counter-cultural" life. This brand of anarchism eschews collective organisation and rigorous political analysis for more freewheeling, zany and individualistic social actions or events.

Well excuse me, but I am a little weary of people presenting "anarchist" fashion statements or dope driven "anarchist" dinner parties as incisive forms of political action. Although cultural expression is clearly enmeshed within political and social change, what I have seen continually occur is that this brand of anarchist lifestyle politics does not form part of a movement but be-

comes the movement. Difficult political discussions and organised political activism are thereby insidiously framed as somehow “non-anarchist” or just not groovy enough. By constantly privileging cultural expression, the revolutionary possibilities of anarchism are inevitably emptied out leaving only an individualistic and ultimately conservative lifestyle choice.

The “Visions of Freedom” Conference

From a feminist perspective I believe it is of the utmost importance to work through why anarchism seems to attract or produce this tendency towards individualistic lifestyle politics, as this tendency makes anarchism irrelevant to other organised social movements. At the “Visions of Freedom” conference, this tendency towards conservative individualism arose in a number of guises.

My central criticism is that within the dominant views expressed at the conference, there was web of resistance to serious political debate and engagement. This was of course not always present, but there seemed to be a dominant assumption that what anarchism “is” is somehow self-evident and does not require a great deal of explanation. There was little desire to work through what the defining concepts of traditional anarchism are and how effectively these concepts work towards lasting change in society, particularly when compared with other revolutionary theories. There was almost no discussion at all of how these concepts have been affected by the onslaught of diverse emancipatory movements such as feminism, anti-racism, environmentalism, and lesbian and gay movements.

My puzzlement over this lack of rigour was brought into sharp relief when at several points during the conference, some people seemed to be of the view that anarchism was not even a theory of larger structural change but merely a way of living one’s individual life. During one paper, a group of people were staunchly opposed to the idea that an anarchist organisation would work towards changing people’s views. The problem appeared to be that there was an inherent violence and curtailment of freedom of choice in trying to change opinions.

Teasing out this opposition is revealing. It is not a new argument that people’s beliefs are socially or ideologically constructed. Therefore, if we disagree with current, dominant ideological systems (which as anarchists should be a given) then one should be working towards changing these structures and hence people’s beliefs. What seems to have been the real difficulty is that many people believe that when one identifies as an anarchist, somehow all the shackles of ideological construction wither away and one becomes spontaneously free and equal. Hence any attempt to change this is to commit violence and to limit freedom.

It is extremely naive to view ideology as ever withering away. Values, belief systems and political theories are always determined by a particular ideological and material position and the ideology of anarchism is just as socially constructed as the ideology of capitalism. Otherwise we would see just as many anarchist men organising against violence against women (“girls stuff”) as we do against police brutality (“real politics”). The ideology which drives the view that casting off the shackles of our dominant social beliefs somehow makes us “naturally free and equal” is the ideology of eighteenth century western liberal humanism, which tells the story that we are all born as equal individuals in control of our destiny. Wrong of course, and such anti-materialist, liberal individualism is supposed to be in opposition to traditional anarchist theory

and action. Despite this, the fundamental tenets of this particular view of freedom, spontaneity and individualism continually frame much anarchist thought.

Excluding Visions of Freedom

The issue of “exclusion” provided a significant channel through which liberal ideology arose in conference discussions. During Rob Sparrow’s paper on anarchist organisation, there was palpable horror from many people at the idea that part of defining what anarchism “is” is to define what values and principles are not anarchist and hence would be excluded from an anarchist organisation. Again, it is a banal and obvious point that if anarchism is opposed to authoritarian structures, it should not be many things: it should not be misogynist, fascist, homophobic etc. However, this point kept getting lost by many people beneath their fiery commitment to an abstract notion of “freedom”. As I’ve said, ideology does not cease to operate by invoking the magic word “freedom”. The ideology of a freedom which claims to exclude no-one and tolerate a plurality of conflicting viewpoints is merely liberal pluralism, the status quo. Liberal pluralism ostensibly gives everyone equal rights and freedom of speech, but in fact excludes all but the dominant point of view by failing to take critical perspectives seriously, if not overtly vilifying them.

True to the repressive tolerance of liberal pluralism, particular groups were consistently excluded from the conference. There was almost no sustained discussion of race issues, particularly indigenous peoples’ issues, during the plenary sessions and very little during the seminars. In a society underpinned by blatant racism, that is appalling. Racism is not an optional extra for political analysis but must be continually woven within every single political discussion. And white groups should never expect indigenous speakers to bother interacting with them unless a real commitment to engage with the oppression indigenous people face is displayed.

As was so powerfully described during the final plenary session, queer theory was also effectively excluded during the conference, not least by the display of homophobic imagery. To defend the existence of such imagery by the ritual incantation of freedom of speech, the most fundamental of all liberal premises, fails to understand that images and speech are fundamental tools of oppression and that it makes a difference if a negative image is against an oppressed group or against a dominant social group.

Very few women spoke during plenary debates or seminars (except at the seminar on feminism). Women’s lack of confidence in public speaking is not because women are somehow naturally more passive or acquiescent, but because patriarchy teaches women to feel less confident in taking up public space and putting forward ideas. This is not an individual problem but an institutional problem which has to be dealt with through institutional means, such as affirmative action on the speaking list. On any conference panel, there should be at least one woman, if not an equal number or more women speaking. If few women are interested in presenting papers, that simply raises the question again of why is anarchism failing to attract the feminist movement which is phenomenally more powerful, articulate and active in Australia than any anarchist movement has ever been.

Anarchism's Political Disengagement

But these overt forms of silencing aside, the most infuriating and extraordinary form of exclusion was the absolute refusal of the dominant voices at the conference to engage with critical perspectives. Failing to engage with critical ideas is a refusal by the person or group criticised to take responsibility for the implications of the critique on their position. It is the essence of repressive tolerance, in that a marginalised group may speak but will have no hope of changing the power structures of the dominant group for the dominant group are refusing to engage with their demands. To make it crystal clear to anyone who has missed the basic point, women, indigenous peoples, peoples from non-English speaking backgrounds, lesbian women and gay men are all oppressed social groups, whether it be in an anarchist organisation or within a capitalist bureaucracy. The word “anarchism” is not a magic wand that suddenly makes all people equal. If anarchism wishes to become relevant to those groups and flourish as a political movement, rather than basically remaining the province of white, heterosexual men, then self scrutiny and critical engagement with analyses presented by those groups is essential.

The seminar on “Violence, Militarism and the State”, a seminar ostensibly on institutionalised violence, makes these points obvious. I really would have thought that surely by now it was no longer contentious that women are by far the greatest targets for institutionalised physical violence, either in their daily lives or during military actions, with violence against indigenous women being by far the worst. Violence against women is condoned by the huge percentage of men who commit it, by the law, by the police, by the media and by social norms. A 1995 survey reveals that 30% of people in Australia still think women “cry rape”. That’s one third of the country. That’s pretty institutionalised. The fact that violence against women, which includes terrorism, beatings, kidnapping, false imprisonment, rape and murder, is not understood as the most prevalent form of torture is merely one sign of its institutionalised acceptance.

Despite this, however, there was almost no gender specific discussion at all during the “Violence, Militarism and the State” seminar (I didn’t hear any in fact, but apparently one of the speakers said something in the ten minutes I missed). This extraordinary exclusion of violence against women renders the analysis during that seminar complicit with the perpetuation of such violence. Failing to speak about the most prevalent form of institutionalised violence in this society undermines and makes invisible the centrality of violence against women and renders it merely an optional extra to discuss after “real” violence (presumably by the “State” or the “military”) has been considered. As one of the seminar participants so aptly snapped at me: “[T]hat woman spoke about domestic violence yesterday. I came to hear about anarchism”.

Although my comments on these issues were acknowledged by some of the seminar speakers as true, there was no attempt at all to engage their analysis with what I had said. It was simply yet another interesting point about violence. But placing violence against women in the equation of violence, militarism and the State fundamentally changes any political analysis of these issues. For a start, one can no longer name the enemy only as a nebulous concept of the State or military institutions — one has to start pointing the finger at men. And that does not mean that men are not socially constructed and that the military industrial complex or the multifaceted State do not perpetuate the norms which permit violence against women. But it does mean that men as a group have to start taking responsibility for men’s violence (including talking about it in seminars) and devising ways to stop it. Traditional anarchism’s analysis of State power and the police will also be forced to shift if violence against women is seriously considered. Do anarchists

support women turning to the police or State funded refuges when they are escaping violence by men? Some anarchist traditions are also committed to the principle of non-violence, within the analysis that violent means produce violent ends. Does that mean that self-defence by a woman against a violent man is “unanarchist”? All these issues could have and should have been teased out and considered for they will fundamentally affect definitions of anarchist political theory. They are not merely “interesting views” and if they continue to be seen as such, anarchism will remain basically irrelevant to half of society.

Anarchism without feminism is a partial, crippled and ultimately oppressive tradition. However, I still feel hopeful enough to say that there are many principles within both feminism and anarchism from which both theories could learn and develop. But any relationship between these two emancipatory frameworks cannot be assumed: it must be forged within concrete political struggle and rigorous political debate. Empty gestures towards nebulous concepts of individualistic freedom totally miss the point. I look forward, tentatively, to a politics of engagement.

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