

Negativity and positivity in anarchism: An inextricable but contradictory duality

**My initial purpose was to reflect on the unavoidable, and often undervalued,
negative dimension of anarchism—but I soon realised this forced me to leave
aside its entire positive aspect**

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Contents

Anarchist radical negativity	3
The essential anarchist dream	5
As an uncertain conclusion	5

When I turned on my computer to begin writing this text, I was tempted to title it: “A passionate praise of the negativity of anarchism,” since my purpose was precisely to reflect on this unavoidable, and often undervalued, dimension of anarchism. However, I soon realised that this forced me to leave aside a good part of what constitutes anarchism. Specifically, the whole positive aspect that also defines it was marginalised. So, to remedy this unfortunate amputation, I had no choice but to undertake the elaboration of a second article that would be titled this time: “Enthusiastic apology for the anarchist dream and its intermittent embodiments in reality”.

Now, since my commitment was to deliver a single article to *Redes Libertarias*, I finally decided to give up that first title and to merge both reflections into a single text. It would not be appropriate to relate here this anecdote, which is typical of the private sphere of the author of this article and is devoid of the slightest substantial interest, if it were not for the fact that the decision to unite the two reflections has had for me the beneficial effect of putting the focus on the dilemma intrinsic to anarchism itself. Indeed, from that decision I have come to perceive it as an entity cut from the same pattern as the two-faced deity called *Janus* in ancient Rome, endowed with two diametrically opposed faces, but inseparably united.

Anarchist radical negativity

To illustrate anarchist *negativity*, one can refer to Mikhail Bakunin, who saw in “the passion for destruction a creative passion,” or to Max Stirner, who considered that “the eradication of fixed ideas” (his famous *spooks*) that permeate our minds was the condition for destroying our docile submission to the execrable authority of the established order. However, apart from these historical references, this *negativity* is based, in my opinion, on two of the various basic characteristics of anarchism. The first is its scrupulous respect for the autonomy of individuals and collectives, as well as for the inalienable principle of self-organisation. The second is its radical refusal to reproduce what it intends to combat.

Let no one think or decide for you, let no one organise your life, or the form of your struggle, are expressions that resonate strongly in the anarchist sphere. This respect for autonomy leads anarchists to reject without hesitation any temptation to inject struggles from outside with the principles that should guide them, the forms that they should take and the goals that they should pursue. All these elements must be formed within the struggles themselves and be the direct work of their protagonists, without anything coming from outside of them channelling them (not even anarchism itself). This is the necessary condition for not violating the full autonomy of those who rise up against the devices of domination, oppression and exploitation that govern our societies.

It also turns out that, if autonomy is truly valued, as anarchism claims to do, it is only achieved by practising it, and that this peculiarity prevents any type of intervention external to the autonomous process itself. Autonomy is an integral part of the action that strives to achieve it, or in other words, autonomy cannot be achieved in any other way than through its own exercise.

Respecting the autonomy of those who lead the struggles therefore implies rejecting any vanguardism and state control, and requires abstaining from formulating positive proposals (whether of an organisational nature, setting objectives, or defining ways of acting) that do not arise from the struggle itself. Based on these basic considerations, all that remains is to strive to contribute to dismantling the mechanisms and instruments of oppression that impede the exercise of auton-

omy, without introducing into this exercise our own schemes, our principles and purposes, since these have been predefined in other struggles and in other historical circumstances.

Anarchism is thus presented as an instrument of destruction of the established order, allowing the practices developed in the struggles to shape alternatives, material achievements and general principles, gradually tracing, through situated practices, the path to follow.

This does not mean that when anarchists get involved in a struggle they should leave their own weapons, ideas and proposals off the battlefield; they carry them with them and it would be absurd to ask them to give up their way of thinking, being and acting. It is simply a matter of letting oneself be carried away, as much as possible, by the dynamics drawn up by the struggle instead of trying to direct it decisively, since there is always the possibility of leaving it if, at some point, it contradicts one's own convictions and schemes.

The second basic characteristic of anarchism, in relation to the subject addressed here, is established in its radical refusal to generate, in its own course, effects of domination and mechanisms of oppression. Using an expression that I owe to my comrade Rafa Cid, it is a matter of anarchism being literally "indominant" in order to be consistent with its own presuppositions, that is, devoid of the effects of domination. Now, to the extent that we are totally immersed in the system we combat, it is inevitable that it leaves certain traces of that which characterises it in our way of being and in our proposals. This means that it is difficult to avoid the logic of domination leaving traces in what we think and build because we always do so from within the system in which we live.

Formulations and realisations that are radically foreign to the existing system, and contrary to its characteristics, can only arise from that which it does not control or contaminate. In other words, the new, the radical creation, emerges in the spaces that escape the system and that means that this "new world that we carry in our hearts" can only be thought of and emerge from outside the system that we fight, that is, from its ruins. Consequently, the task of anarchism is to bring about the collapse of the system, reducing it to simple ruins on which truly different flowers can sprout, which clearly places it in the realm of radical *negativity*.

This is precisely considering that what we have the capacity to project before having destroyed what exists, will always bear its marks, since it is formed into what we project. That is the reason why Max Stirner advocated replacing the concept of revolution, aimed at promoting a social form that substitutes the existing one, with the concept of a permanent insurrection against the established. An insurrection that does not seek to overthrow the current social institution to replace it with a new social institution arising from a hypothetical revolution, but rather limits itself to attacking at every turn the current one that is unbearable.

Whether we consider the first of the two characteristics of anarchism that I have mentioned, or the second, it is clear that anarchism places resistance against the current system at the centre of the game, allowing this resistance against the established power to create the conditions for building, on the ruins of what has been overthrown, the guidelines for values different from those that exist, and for social forms that are alternative to those that are in force.

What concerns anarchism in this process is, basically, to contribute to the destruction of what has been established, and to continue practising resistance as soon as alternative social forms have been established, which, by the way, are not prefigured in anarchism, but will eventually be created by the autonomous struggles themselves in the process of destroying capitalism.

The essential anarchist dream

In contrast to the stubborn *negativity* of anarchism, in accordance with its most defining principles, it is, of course, its second face that explains why it arouses such fervour among those of us who are framed within its coordinates. The pleasure that comes from feeling part of an extraordinary tradition of struggle and a magnificent historical experience that ignores borders and crosses cultures is as important to our self-definition as anarchists as the corpus of libertarian writings that forge our identity and that form a shared culture or the practices of solidarity and mutual support that weave the libertarian space.

It does not matter if the obstacles that the utopia that inspires us faces seem insurmountable, the hope of overcoming them at some point is key to encouraging the spirit of struggle, and even to maintaining the intensity of resistance. Although *negativity* is considered the most coherent perspective of anarchism, it is still true that fighting *for something* and not just *against something*, as well as pursuing objectives and trying to get other people to share them, gives a strong impulse to the struggles and gives them a different tone, much more convivial and more optimistic than that which emanates from pure negativity.

To build and live in the present some of the aspects of the anarchist dream, to experience the camaraderie that is forged in the heat of shared ideas and common desires, to feel the union in the elaboration of shared projects and the enthusiasm of participating in their realisation, all of this is irreplaceable in the configuration of anarchism. To imagine what does not exist, but which, nevertheless, could come to be, and to cherish the promises that nest in utopia, are elements that contribute to forging an identity that makes us feel part of a beloved community in which we immerse ourselves by our own choice and decision, and not by obligations of a legal, labour, national, gender or family order, among many other sources of ascribed determinations.

Now, could it be that those aspects of anarchism that are, ultimately, those that motivate to a large extent our harmony with its postulates and with its work, turn out to be contradictory with the essential *negativity* of anarchism? Could it be that the establishment of principles, the definition of goals, the elaboration of models of society, the constitution of a specific identity, the formation of a culture of its own, with its symbols, its memory, its emblematic figures, etc., violates its *indominant* character, causing that when the anarchist dream becomes involved in a struggle, it is blown up in relation to the full autonomy of those who have undertaken it?

As an uncertain conclusion

It seems quite clear that, on the one hand, anarchist negativity and, on the other, the intoxicating anarchist dream do not simply represent different aspects of the same entity. They are not different but complementary elements, but rather clearly antagonistic aspects. In fact, negativity and the anarchist dream are simply incompatible. In other words, the anarchist dream is opposed to that which anarchist negativity pursues, and makes it impossible for the latter to achieve its objectives of preserving the autonomy of the struggles and of the collectives that lead them. By penetrating the struggles, wrapped in its valuable and precious attributes, it is clear that anarchism injects into them principles elaborated outside of them.

In short, the anarchist dream puts the *indominant* character of anarchism in a difficult position, leading it to contradict its own anti-state-control principles and its radical commitment to

autonomy. For its part, anarchist negativity completely marginalises, and practically eliminates, everything that makes anarchism attractive and rich, considering that the anarchist dream is far from *indominant*, and is, so to speak, insufficiently anarchist. Thus, it seems that the only thing that can be done is to recognise that anarchism has an intrinsic dilemma, and to note that two clearly antagonistic and undeniably contradictory entities coexist within it.

However, the contradictory does not have to be disqualified and rejected on principle, since Aristotelian logic does not rest on any imperative and absolute mandate. In addition to the existence of other types of logic (and there are some...) it is also worth bearing in mind that certain realities can be simultaneously antagonistic and symbiotic (power and freedom perfectly illustrate this figure).

Perhaps the richness of anarchism lies precisely in knowing how to maintain the constant tension between its two facets, assuming that it is precisely the contradiction that they draw that preserves it from falling into the placid immobility of things that are unproblematic or that are presented as such. Anarchism is what lives and moves at the precise point where there is an extreme tension between these two irremediably opposed, but intimately intertwined, facets of wanting to live collectively free, while at the same time wanting to live radically *indominant*.

It is precisely its inability to keep this tension alive that leads a good part of anarchism to underestimate the importance of the negativity that characterises it and to privilege what I have called here the anarchist dream. However, it turns out that focusing on the anarchist dream leads to experiencing a certain frustration in the face of the evidence that its realisation only manages to materialise, and in a partial way, in relatively small spaces and in few numbers. This frustration, which does not have to lead to taking refuge in inaction, sometimes encourages resorting to the search for scapegoats instead of proceeding to a calm analysis of the reasons for this stagnation, and to the exercise of a certain self-criticism in the face of one's own inadequacies.

To the extent that post-structuralism, conceptualised by, among others, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, or Jacques Derrida (which should not be confused with the American offspring of French Theory, nor with the broken bag of postmodernism) has put into question certain postulates that anarchism inherited from the Enlightenment, such as, among many others, and to mention here just two examples, the belief in grand narratives or the confidence in progress, it has been quite easy to make post-structuralism and its thinkers the scapegoat responsible for this stagnation and the weakening of the vigour of the class struggle and the fragmentation of the fronts of struggle. The worrying thing is that this focus on the search for scapegoats ignores the fact that the drastic changes experienced by capitalism and the societies it shapes make certain models of confrontation with the system inoperative because they are outdated and cause those who cling to them to stagnate.

Carefully scrutinising these changes is the first condition for inventing and articulating new forms of struggle that dismantle the established system and open paths to another way of life closer to the anarchist dream.

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