

Metapolitics and Anarchism

The Dispute over Common Sense as One of the Conditions for Revolution

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April 26, 2026

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“By metapolitics I mean the effects that a philosophy can derive, in and of itself, from the fact that real politics are thoughts.” — Alain Badiou, *Abrégé de métapolitique*, Éditions du Seuil, 1998

What is metapolitics?

Metapolitics refers to the level at which the premises that make the politics of a given era possible and legitimate are established. It is not simply a “discourse about politics,” nor a propaganda technique: it is the struggle for the prior framework that determines what counts as a problem, what counts as a solution, and what counts as common sense.

In its earliest modern sense, the term is formulated by analogy with metaphysics: just as metaphysics aims to go beyond physics, metapolitics points to what transcends ordinary politics; that is, to the principles concerning human nature, sociability, law, and legitimacy that condition the political field. This initial definition is important because it prevents reducing metapolitics to a contemporary fad: from its origin, it names the pre-political dimension where the categories that later appear natural are fabricated.

In practice, this means that metapolitics operates wherever social perception is produced and organized. It becomes evident when a society learns to call punitive expansion “security” and deregulation “freedom”; when precarity is translated as “lack of employability” rather than exploitation; when social conflict is rewritten as “public order” rather than material antagonism; when racism is disguised as “culture” and patriarchy as “family.” These semantic shifts are not merely academic debate: they determine which policies will appear reasonable and which as unthinkable. Metapolitics operates in schools and workplaces, in the press and entertainment, from the pulpit to the platform, because it is there that the vocabulary with which people interpret their lives is stabilized.

Origins and historical-political uses

The genealogy of the term is longer and more complex than its recent circulation suggests. The label “metapolitics” already appears in an unpublished manuscript attributed to Juan Caramuel (17th century): a fact that does not allow us to speak of a continuous tradition, but does break the idea of a single, late origin.

Its modern consolidation arrived in the last quarter of the 18th century as an explicit analogy of metaphysics applied to politics. In 1784, Jean-Louis de Lolme proposed “metapolitics” to name a still unexplored branch that, instead of limiting itself to ordinary political science, interrogated the principles concerning human nature and human affairs that allow for an understanding of government. In 1785, Gottlieb (Amadeus) Hufeland introduced *Metapolitik* in German as a set of preliminary propositions that prepare determinations about rights and institutions before presupposing the State. Shortly thereafter, Schlözer established metapolitics as an “abstract” of natural law and an investigation of the human being “before the State,” prior to general public law and the theory of forms of government.

From this first cycle, the term carries an ambivalence that does not disappear: it can be a critical reflection of foundations or it can become a doctrinal legitimation of the order.

In the 19th century, the term circulated intermittently and controversially, and its fluctuating usage became visible. Joseph de Maistre employed it as a “metaphysics of politics” in a counter-

revolutionary vein, aiming to elevate the problem of power to a science of the substantial and fundamental aspects of empire formation. In Spain, Ramón Salas (1821) spoke of a “metapolitics as metaphysics” to challenge abstract theories lacking empirical basis and to advocate for a political science founded on experience. In both cases, the core of the conflict is evident: metapolitics as a critique of formalism or as a philosophical pretext for naturalizing hierarchies.

In the 20th century, the term reappeared with divergent meanings and ultimately underwent a strategic shift. In some uses, it acquired historical significance and was associated with state doctrines; in others, it was elevated to a philosophical plane where “meta” categories of liberal politics were defined. But the decisive transformation was that, from the second half of the 20th century onward, “metapolitics” came to denote a prolonged intervention in culture, education, media, and mentalities aimed at preparing for future political shifts. This twist crystallized when the European radical right, after 1968, turned the culture war into a program: the term became a slogan for conquering first common sense and then the institutional apparatus.

In parallel, the reappropriation from the philosophical left reverses the gesture. For Badiou, metapolitics does not signify a sovereign doctrine over the State, but rather the relationship by which philosophy draws consequences from the fact that real politics are thoughts: truths in action. Thus, the history of the word is marked by a dispute: between a use that seeks to found and justify order and another that seeks to understand and enhance emancipatory sequences without speaking from outside them. Metapolitics is, therefore, a name in conflict because it names a terrain in conflict: the place where it is decided what world is imaginable.

Metapolitics and Hegemony

Gramsci, metapolitics and hegemony

Gramsci helps us understand why metapolitics is not an intellectual embellishment, but a material terrain where power is organized. Hegemony is not equivalent to “cultural leadership” or more effective propaganda, but to the capacity of a social bloc to transform its worldview into common sense; to make particular interests feel universal; and to generate consent where coercion alone would be fragile and unstable. To govern does not simply mean to command, but to fabricate a moral and affective normality that makes command acceptable. This normality is deposited in civil society, in its institutions and routines, in its vocabulary, in its life expectations, and in its hierarchies of dignity. Domination becomes more solid when it ceases to be perceived as domination.

From this definition, a strategic consequence emerges: politics is not decided solely in the institutional arena, because institutions arrive late to a battle that has already taken place in the cultural sphere. The cultural battle is not the “environment” of the economy nor a supplement to politics: it is a factory of perception and legitimacy. Whoever determines the words with which a society interprets its problems largely determines the scope of its solutions. Metapolitics precisely names this conscious and sustained intervention on the framework: a long-term strategy aimed at reshaping common sense, not at winning a specific debate.

The contemporary far right has grasped this logic with discipline and patience. Its effectiveness is not explained solely by its electoral performance, but by its capacity to shift the boundaries of what can be said and reshape consensus before vying for power. It operates metapolitically when it transforms the anti-immigration framework into “realism” rather than scapegoating;

when it elevates security rhetoric (control, borders, defense, etc.) to a public morality; when it presents conspiracies as legitimate suspicions; when it translates material hardship into identity-based fear. The decisive effect is not that everyone believes every slogan, but that the adversary's vocabulary begins to shape public discourse. At that point, the far right governs partially even from the opposition and from marginal/minority spaces, because it forces institutional politics to operate within its framework.

Introducing Carlo Gambescia at this point helps avoid two symmetrical errors: confusing metapolitics with propaganda and fetishizing it as if it were a magic formula. His approach is to treat it as a perspective on power, attentive to regularities, limits, and concrete forms of legitimacy. Metapolitics, in this sense, is a discipline that studies how power is won, maintained, and lost; what social means sustain it; and why certain collective goals become credible or collapse. By distinguishing between a metapolitics of theory and a metapolitics of action, Gambescia allows us to see how churches, foundations, informal networks, and media apparatuses operate metapolitically by organizing morality, taste, and common sense, even when they do not present themselves as "political."

The culture war is not won with performative outrage or isolated arguments. It is won by building organized social power: creating structures that provide continuity and generate trust, using language that connects with everyday experience, and developing practices capable of establishing a different normality. Because it is not merely a symbolic battle, but a material one: it is fought in the concrete conditions of existence.

The rise of the modern radical right through metapolitics

The contemporary rise of the radical right cannot be understood merely as an electoral shift: it is the result of a coherent metapolitical strategy, explicitly formulated since the late 1960s by Alain de Benoist and the GRECE group – Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne (Research and Studies Group for European Civilization). Their diagnosis was that institutional politics is a late effect of a prior victory in the cultural arena. Hence their commitment to a reactionary "war of position": intervening in ideas, education, the media, aesthetics, and everyday morality to make certain hierarchies and exclusions seem reasonable before claiming them as law.

This method is clearly evident in the normalization of anti-immigrant discourse. Concepts such as "invasion," "demographic replacement," "loss of identity," and the imperative to "return to tradition" were gradually established as common language through alternative media, cultural production, pseudo-academic analyses, and a deliberately provocative aesthetic that sought to break taboos and shift the boundaries of what is acceptable. Conspiracy theories like the "Great Replacement" emerged as a cultural narrative capable of reorganizing social unrest under an identity and racial logic, displacing conflict from material structures to enemies constructed within their narrative. When these frameworks reach parliament, they arrive already legitimized by a prolonged metapolitical process that has transformed them into common sense for significant sectors of the population. This can explain the political and cultural rise of the populist far right worldwide.

Metapolitics and Anarchism

Although the term metapolitics has not been central to the historical vocabulary of anarchism, the practice it names has always been at the heart of a libertarian politics with revolutionary ambitions. The reason is material, not terminological: domination is not exhausted by the State, but is reproduced in everyday mechanisms of authority, in moral norms, in precarious and disciplinary labor, in racism and patriarchy, in the media's management of fear, and in a subjectivity trained to delegate, compete, and obey. Metapolitics matters because it is the plane where these mechanisms become "common sense": where certain hierarchies seem inevitable and certain alternatives seem childish, dangerous, or simply unthinkable.

Contemporary authors allow us to refine this intuition without turning it into a slogan. Abensour helps us understand "anarchy" as a force that destabilizes the principle of command even before its institutional crystallization, pointing out that the struggle against domination begins with the practical rejection of authority as a foundation. Critchley formulates an anarchist metapolitics as an ethics of resistance that produces subjects not reconciled with the existing order, and that upholds disobedience not as an individual gesture but as a collective commitment to justice. Nappalos, for his part, insists on a metapolitics of motivation: organized work based on dispositions, expectations, and learning that make sustained collective action possible, especially when the present weighs heavily as a fatality and the emancipatory future seems unreal.

The strategic consequence is undeniable. A libertarian communist society cannot emerge solely from direct confrontation with political power if the majority continues to equate "order" with command, "security" with punishment, "freedom" with competition, and "democracy" with a parliamentary state. In such a scenario, even a rupture can be filled by authoritarian, bureaucratic, or punitive solutions, because the dominant imaginary already presents these as the only "realistic" options. Anarchist metapolitics is, therefore, a revolutionary task: to contest what is perceived as normal, just, and desirable, and to do so through organization, culture, and practices that build legitimacy for self-management. It is not about replacing material struggle with narratives, but about producing the subjective and social conditions without which material struggle cannot be sustained or translated into emancipation.

Metapolitics in a revolutionary strategy

Metapolitics must be integrated into revolutionary strategy as a set of intersecting, overlapping, and mutually reinforcing fields of intervention, without replacing organization or material conflict. It is not a linear path nor a decisive lever in itself: it is a dimension that expands the realm of possibility, challenges legitimacies, and reduces the capacity of the established order to present itself as natural.

The field of public perception and common sense: identifying which narratives shape social experience and where they clash with real life. Here, useful contradictions are sought—when "merit" fails to explain precarity, when "security" masks violence, when "freedom" signifies economic subjugation—and interventions are made through situated analysis, educational materials, local public discussion, and campaigns that connect concrete events with emancipatory frameworks. The measure of effectiveness is not virality, but rather the shift in the interpretive framework.

The field of social practices and grassroots institutions: metapolitics occurs not only in what is said, but also in what becomes normalized through repetition. Self-managed spaces, mutual support networks, cooperatives, social centers, and resistance funds operate metapolitically when they produce sustained collective capacity and break the association between “order” and command. Here, the tactics are organizational: to create experiences of effective cooperation.

The realm of language and moral signifiers: there are words that govern without appearing to do so because they define what is legitimate. “Crime,” “family,” “nation,” “radical,” “legitimacy,” and “democracy” delimit the perimeter of what is acceptable. Challenging them is not a semantic game: it is preventing the enemy from dictating the vocabulary of the conflict. Tactics can range from glossaries and internal training to public reinterpretations that anchor language in concrete experience.

The aesthetic-affective and memory field: politics doesn’t advance solely through reason; it also organizes desires, fears, and affiliations, and helps us understand that what is often experienced as a “personal” problem is not simply the result of how a person is or acts, but rather the expression of a collective and systemic problem. Here, the decision is made as to whether emancipation appears as a desirable and shareable life or as a bleak sacrifice. Art, design, music, narratives, rituals, the hospitality of spaces, and the memory of struggles are important when they produce identification, dignity, and a sense of purpose, and when they allow us to translate individual unease into collective consciousness. Tactics can include cultural cycles, audiovisual pieces, interventions in public spaces, and the recovery of local histories.

The digital field as both mediation and vulnerability: simply “being online” is not enough; we must recognize that the internet is no longer a space separate from social life, but a fully integrated dimension that articulates the so-called “real world,” shaping relationships, perceptions, conflicts, and forms of organization. Therefore, it is necessary to combine a tactical presence on platforms with forms of coordination that do not depend on algorithms. Shared channels, affinity networks, proprietary infrastructure where feasible, and a sustained culture of digital security and self-care are material conditions for continuity.

The field of counter-manipulation: making the operations that manufacture consensus legible without replicating them as control techniques. Emancipatory metapolitics is defined by an ethical limit: it cannot be based on producing obedience. Its tactics include media literacy, critical reading of moral panics, debunking statistics and security frameworks, and a counter-propaganda explicitly political in its intent, oriented toward critical autonomy and the capacity for judgment.

Ultimately, these fronts only make sense if they are linked to material struggles and genuine revolutionary organization. Metapolitics doesn’t replace confrontation with power or the accumulation of strength: it accompanies, prepares for, and sustains them, reducing the risk of the conflict being absorbed by the enemy’s framework. In a libertarian strategy, its function is not to guarantee the outcome, but to increase the social plausibility of self-management and weaken the everyday legitimacies of domination. In real-world politics, that is already a significant achievement.

Strategic conclusions

Metapolitics is not a substitute for revolutionary strategy, but it is one of its conditions of possibility. It functions as both a thermometer and an auxiliary lever: it indicates the limits of legitimacy imposed by the established order and allows for their expansion, without falling into the fantasy that cultural change, in and of itself, dismantles material relations of domination. Integrated with organization, conflict, and the accumulation of power, metapolitics reduces the adversary's capacity to present itself as common sense and increases the social plausibility of self-management.

The rise of the radical right confirms an uncomfortable lesson: one can lose at the polls and still gain ground by controlling the vocabulary, public morality, and the system of emotions. Therefore, the response cannot be limited to correcting facts or expressing outrage. It requires challenging the actual mechanisms of legitimation, attacking the frameworks that transform exclusion into "realism" and punishment into "security," and building spaces where an alternative normality can be experienced as effective.

For a libertarian politics with revolutionary ambitions, the conclusion is stark. If the majority continues to associate order with command, freedom with competition, and democracy with the state, any rupture is vulnerable to bureaucratic or punitive restoration, even with emancipatory rhetoric. The strategic task consists of producing subjects, habits, and collective capacities compatible with life without authority: sustainable forms of cooperation, distinct languages rooted in experience, and an active memory that prevents the present from being perceived as destiny.

In operational terms, this implies two criteria. First, that metapolitics only has revolutionary value when it is embodied in practices that increase social power from below, and not when it devolves into a self-contained subculture. Second, that its effectiveness is measured by concrete effects: by the expansion of what can be said; by the delegitimization of everyday hierarchies; by the capacity to sustain organization under pressure; and by the creation of grassroots institutions that make self-management practicable.

Metapolitics, understood in this way, offers no guarantees. But it does allow for something crucial: that the revolution ceases to depend on exceptional moments and becomes an accumulative process, where the common sense of command loses ground while, in real life, the social conditions for living without it grow.

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