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Power and Anarchism

Approxomation or Contradiction?

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The Latin American debate and Europe

First of all, I would like to acknowledge the invitation from the comrades at *Ekintza Zuzena* magazine, who, after reading the book *Anarchism and Popular Power: South American Theory and Practice*,¹ were interested in the present topic and decided to put it up for debate. For me and for the anarchist current to which I belong, *especificista* anarchism, the debate on power in general and popular power in particular is of the utmost importance, not only for a rereading of anarchist classics, but also for political practice of a revolutionary character. Therefore, we must salute and celebrate the decision.

In Latin America there is some controversy around these issues, but in different countries and for many groups and organizations—this is the case, for example, for the nine Brazilian organizations that make up the Brazilian Anarchist Coordination [Coordenação Anarquista Brasileira] (CAB) and the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU)—there has been broad agreement for some years now. It is important that this debate continues to take place in Europe, and that in some way links up with others that are taking place, such as the one that the Federation of Anarchist Communists (FdCA) is conducting based on the contributions of the Brazilian CAB.

The terms of debate

Unfortunately, the terms of debate on power and popular power, as presented in *Anarchism and Popular Power*, are quite troublesome, especially for those who oppose the relationship that has been established between anarchism and power and between anarchism and popular power. It can be seen especially in the con-

¹ Ediciones Gato Negro (ed.), *Anarquismo y poder popular: teoría y práctica suramericana*.

tributions of Patrick Rossineri and Rafael Uzcátegui.² There are at least three fundamental problems that complicate the debate and that we point out below.

First, the authors are correct in arguing that this debate should not be carried out on the basis of testing to see who is the most anarchist, nor should others be accused without argument of not being an anarchist. But when the authors argue that the defense of popular power implies “a form of integration into the system”³ or claim that “the term PP [popular power] is an update on what the authoritarians defined, before the fall of the Wall, as a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat,’”⁴ they are saying, between the lines, that if there are anarchists who defend the concept of popular power, they would be integrated into the system and/or defend the dictatorship of the proletariat, which, since it constitutes one of the main flags of classical Marxism, would put them closer to Marxism and distance them from anarchism. This disqualification of the adversary position, in addition to lacking a consistent argumentation, does not properly and seriously establish the debate.

Second, a discussion of this type must take into account the distinction between form and content: a historical phenomenon and/or a strategic position must be distinguished from the terminology used to refer to them. This distinction is necessary because the debate on power among anarchists, as it is taking place, is much more a question of terminology — that is, of the validity or relevance of using that concept — than a debate about anarchist thought and action. After all, the term power, like many others — democracy, freedom, socialism, and even anarchism — varies in meaning from time to time. Consciously or not, at every moment we tend to use and challenge more or less the meaning of terms and concepts.

² Patrick Rossineri, “La quimera del poder popular”; Rafael Uzcátegui, “Grupos libertarios y poder popular.” The following critiques are made in an effort to stimulate serious, respectful and fraternal debate.

³ Patrick Rossineri, *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁴ Rafael Uzcátegui, *Op. cit.*, p. 29.

ical power advocated by anarchists to replace the state, for their part, also represent power, but not domination.

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more dominating the power, the less the participation; and vice versa, the more self-managed, the greater the participation:

The extremes constituted by domination and self-management theoretically mark the logical possibilities of the limits in the processes of participation. Regardless of the real possibility or not of arriving at one of the extreme ideal types, what is relevant is to conceive of them as a logical theoretical model for understanding the different power relations, the types of these relationships and the different forms of participation that derive from them. [...] Conceiving of power relations within these two extremes, from the axis of participation, constitutes a method of analysis of relations in different spheres.²⁴

According to this model, the objective of anarchists was always to support social relations with greater participation and that substituted dominating power—“domination, hierarchy, alienation, monopoly of decisions by a minority, class structure and exploitation”—with self-managing power—“self-management, broad participation in decisions, non-alienated agents, non-hierarchical relations, without relations of domination, without class structure and exploitation”²⁵.

This way of understanding power is contrary to its conception as a synonym for domination or the State. As we have said, domination is a type of power, as is self-management. Power relations can be established with greater or lesser participation, so that power does not necessarily imply domination. The State is a central element of the system of domination, and in all its historical forms it means relations of domination, fundamentally those of a political-bureaucratic type and coercion. Structures of self-managed polit-

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Felipe Corrêa, *Rediscutindo o anarquismo: uma abordagem teórica*, p. 98.

Using the argument of the authors cited, it could be said that James Guillaume, one of the most important names in first-generation anarchism, should not be considered an anarchist, since he always opposed the use of this term and never claimed it as such. It seems that terminological criteria cannot be the only one to define whether or not someone is an anarchist. In this sense, anarchism does not have to be studied through concepts used historically by anarchists. With due rigor and without much difficulty, perhaps we can make use of other concepts — say ‘collective identity’ or ‘symbolic capital’, for example — even if they have never been used by anarchists.

Beyond this, we note that a considerable part of the methodological resources of Rossineri and Uzcátegui do not have argumentative force. Following them we could claim, for example, that defending freedom means being liberal. They define freedom based on a classic liberal and associate their adversary with liberalism. The same could be done with the term “socialism” or with the proximity with Marxism.

All concepts used have a meaning, it is not possible to stick with form without regard to content. In the case in question, if power is conceived in terms of domination and/or State, obviously it can be said that anarchists were and are historically against power. The same applies to the concepts of freedom and socialism: if the former were defended in the liberal sense and the second in the Marxist sense, it could also be said that anarchists are against them. But the anarchists who defend the anarchism-power link give this term a different meaning. What is in question, then, is the necessity or relevance of using the notion of power.

It is a perfectly reasonable argument that in a given context, for various reasons, it is preferable that anarchists do not use the terms *power* and *popular power*. This was the case, for some time, for the Anarchist Federation of Rio de Janeiro [Federação Anarquista

do Rio de Janeiro] (FARJ).⁵ However, it is absurd to want to link the anarchist defense of power or popular power with Marxism or other currents more or less on the left, simply because of the preference in the use of that concept.

Third, it is necessary to distinguish future objectives and strategies that anarchists advocate from the historical reading they have done in the past or do in the present. The history of anarchism is very broad. To theoretically discuss anarchism, in addition to going beyond the Eurocentric focus and adopting a global and broad vision like that of the South African Lucien van der Walt, it is necessary to establish a series of concepts, since in its hundred and fifty years there has been no homogenous conceptualization on the part of anarchists.⁶

Most of the classic anarchists gave to the concept of power a restricted content of State or domination, for that reason they declared themselves in opposition. Bakunin says that “whoever speaks of political power speaks of domination,”⁷ and Kropotkin says that “to the extent that the socialists constitute a power in bourgeois society and in the present state, their socialism will die.”⁸ Malatesta, for his part, criticizes authoritarian socialists stating that they “propose the conquest of power” to emancipate the people, says that this means using the “same mechanism that today has enslaved them” and proposes, as a libertarian way out, the “Abolition of the Government and of all power.”⁹ Even so, defined in another way—which is the most adequate way to establish a dialogue with other authors and militants, to base

⁵ Felipe Corrêa, “Create a strong people.” This text is part of the debate about power that occurred between FARJ militants, which ended with the decision to use and defend the notions of power and popular power.

⁶ Lucien van der Walt, *Black Flame: the revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism*.

⁷ Mikhail Bakunin, “A ilusão do sufrágio universal,” p. 100.

⁸ Piotr Kropotkin, “Modern Science and Anarchism,” p. 189.

⁹ Errico Malatesta, *Ideologia anarquista*, pp. 183 y 200.

By advocating federalism, anarchists proposed, according to René Berthier, social relations based on broad participation in decision-making processes, through a system in which there was “neither absorption of all power from above (centralism), nor atomization of power (autonomism).”²¹ As Frank Mintz points out, the term “self-management” did not emerge until the 1960s to also refer to an organizational model based on broad popular participation.²² Although there have been subsequent attempts to restrict federalism to the political realm and self-management to the economic field, the truth is that they are terms that encompass fairly close concepts and have been used interchangeably by anarchists. The anarchist defense of the socialization of private property and political power and of a culture that reinforces this project, articulated from the bottom up, is based on generalized self-management, taking into account all its social aspects and including the notion of federalism.

Domination and self-management are directly related with the concept of power that we are going to define according to the second approach of Ibáñez. Defining power in this way allows us to conceptualize it as a relationship that is established in the struggles and conflicts between a diversity of social forces, when one(s) force(s) is imposed on the other(s). In this sense, power and power relations function as synonyms.²³ The link between domination, self-management and power runs through the notion of participation: considered established by relationships of power, participation may be greater and approach the field of self-management, or less and bring it closer to that of domination. Looking at them from the perspective of participation, then, domination and self-management would be ideal types of power relations: however

²¹ René Berthier, *Do federalismo*, p. 32.

²² Frank Mintz, *La autogestión en la España revolucionaria*, pp. 26–27.

²³ Felipe Corrêa, “Poder, dominação e autogestão.”

We must work to awaken in the oppressed the living desire for a radical social transformation and convince them that, by uniting, they will have the necessary strength to win. We must extend our ideal and prepare the moral and material forces necessary to defeat the enemy forces and organize the new society.¹⁸

Defeating enemy forces means, for Malatesta, making the revolution, socializing the economy and politics by creating “new institutions, new groupings and new social relations.” It is about initiating a social reconstruction that can “provide satisfaction of immediate needs and prepare the future,” destroying “privileges and harmful institutions and make [...] work, for the benefit of all, the useful institutions that today work exclusively or mainly for the benefit of the ruling classes.”¹⁹

Therefore, based on Ibáñez’s triple definition, it is not possible to claim that anarchists are against power.

Power: between domination and self-management

When anarchists claimed to be against power, they actually used the “word ‘power’ to refer [...] to a ‘certain type of power relations,’” namely, and very specifically, the type of power that we find in the “relations of domination,” in “structures of domination,” in “devices of domination,” or in the “apparatuses of domination.”²⁰ The anarchist critique of exploitation, of coercion, of alienation, always had as a backdrop a critique of domination in general, including class domination and gender domination, domination based on race and between countries or peoples (imperialism).

¹⁸ Errico Malatesta, *Ideología anarquista*, p. 94.

¹⁹ Vernon Richards, *Malatesta: pensamiento y acción revolucionarios*, pp. 147, 154.

²⁰ Tomás Ibáñez, “Por un poder político libertario,” p. 45.

the role of anarchists in social struggles and to formulate proper intervention strategies—classical anarchists can be considered defenders of a certain type of power, which has come to be called “popular power” or “self-managed power.”¹⁰ Historically power has not been defined in this way by anarchists. Although there have been examples of this use of the concept since at least the 1920s, as in the case of Korean anarchism,¹¹ it seems that it was not until after the 1960s that it became more widely disseminated among anarchists.

Distinct from historical reading, however, is the formulation of anarchist strategies based on certain objectives. When anarchists point in this direction, they may consider it more or less relevant to use a certain term, depending on the context in question. For example, in a context where the generalized conception of “democracy” is that of representative democracy, anarchists may decide not to use this term. And the same happens with other terms. This was, exactly, Guillaume’s argument for not calling himself an anarchist: according to his point of view, in that context the generalized conception of the term was misleading.

Anarchism and power

The problem around form and content indicated above is not limited to anarchist studies. Tomás Ibáñez points it out in a rigorous study of power:

The fact that researchers of power relations continue, after so many years, dedicating an important part of their efforts to clarify and refine the content of the notion of power, the fact that there is no widespread min-

¹⁰ Felipe Corrêa, *Rediscutindo o anarquismo: uma abordagem teórica*.

¹¹ Emilio Crisi, *Revolución anarquista en Corea: la Comuna de Shinmin (1929–1932) y otros textos sobre el anarquismo coreano*.

imal agreement on its meaning and that the controversies are more about differences in concept than about operations and results achieved from those conceptualizations, all of this clearly indicates that theorizing about power encounters, somewhere, an epistemological obstacle that prevents progress.¹²

The lack of shared meaning in relation to the term and the epistemological obstacle to which Ibáñez also refers are noted by Rossineri and Uzcátegui. And it is also found in anarchist writings, thus complicating the establishment of a precise discussion on power in anarchism.

As we have said, in the anarchist classics the term power is mostly associated with the state or domination. On the other hand, they often treat the terms domination and authority as synonyms. What we ask ourselves is: should power be conceptualized only as domination or State? Are power, domination and authority synonyms? In my opinion, in both cases the answer is negative.

The hegemonic position within anarchism at least until the 1970s, which still survives today in positions such as those of Rossineri and Uzcátegui, is the one that maintains that anarchists are against all power, understanding it as synonymous with domination or State. Positions of this type have been and still are relatively common: “All anarchist theory is founded on the critique of power and the effects it produces.” Furthermore, “anarchists never proposed popular power, nor power for a class. [...] When there is symmetry and reciprocity in a social relationship, it is because the power relationship ceased to exist.”¹³ However, positions like these were responsible, in some historical moments, for anarchists distancing themselves from politics, from the real intervention in the interplay of forces in society, ultimately condemning them to the role of critical observers of reality, without

¹² Tomás Ibáñez, *Poder y libertad*, p. 11

¹³ Patrick Rossineri, “La quimera del poder popular,” pp. 19–20.

the possibility of intervening in it; in other cases, this translated into misguided strategic decisions, with disastrous consequences.

Deepening the analysis and extrapolating aspects of form, it can be affirmed, as Ibáñez points out and has increasingly become more emphatic and clear in the last forty years, it does not seem acceptable “to consider that the relationship of libertarian thought with the concept of power can only be formulated in terms of denial, exclusion, rejection, opposition or even antinomy.”¹⁴ Ibáñez believes that the innumerable definitions of power can be grouped into three main approaches: 1) power as capacity; 2) power as asymmetry in power relations, and 3) power as structures and mechanisms of regulation and control. Taking this into account, it can be stated: “There is a libertarian conception of power, it is false that it consists of a denial of power.”¹⁵

Historical examples abound for demonstrating that anarchists never opposed the notion that people, groups and social classes have the capacity to realize something; that society is made up of a diversity of forces at play and that, in their quest for social transformation, anarchists must stimulate the growth of a determined force to overcome the enemy, hegemonic forces in the social field; and that, at the same time that they oppose the structures and mechanisms of authoritarian regulation and control, anarchists propose others, with a libertarian base, which constitute the foundations of the future society that they propose.

Bakunin affirms that “the negligible human being represents a minuscule fraction of the social force”¹⁶ Kropotkin emphasises that “force—and a great deal of force—is necessary to prevent workers from taking possession of what they consider unjustly appropriated by the few.”¹⁷ Malatesta, for his part, recommends:

¹⁴ Tomás Ibáñez, “Por un poder político libertario,” p. 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 42–44.

¹⁶ Mikhail Bakunin, *A ciência e a questão vital da revolução*, p. 34.

¹⁷ Piotr Kropotkin, “Anarchist communism,” p. 69.