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Is Political Realism a Trap?

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“Updating Anarchism: The Transnational Debate on Anarchist Ideology and Tactics in the Aftermath of the First World War” by Jason Garner, *Anarchist Studies* 33, number 1, 2025.

This article summarizes and situates debates in the anarchist press in the 1920s, on the issue of how to respond to the failure of the 1918-23 revolutionary wave. The adaptations of this period laid the foundation for the transition of much of left-anarchism into a politics of small groups engaged in propaganda and support for moderate struggles, and mostly foregoing direct action. Its author, Jason Garner, is based at an Argentinean university and has written a string of articles on the history of anarchist, leftist, and labour movements in English, Spanish, and French. It’s behind a paywall (grrrr) but is also online here.

The article analyses a transnational debate within anarchism during the early 1920s over whether anarchist ideology and tactics needed to be revised after the apparent failure of revolutionary movements following the First World War. Rather than treating anarchism as static or doctrinaire, the

author shows that anarchists across several countries actively reassessed their ideas in response to new political realities.

We're mostly talking about stuff like this.

The discussion emerged most clearly after the collapse of the revolutionary hopes which arose between 1918 and 1923 (e.g. the Italian factory councils movement, the German Revolution), and particularly following the rise of fascism in Italy. The failure of the Russian Revolution from an anarchist point of view was also a factor here. Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta played a central role in the debates, arguing that anarchists needed to critically examine their tactics and assumptions in the light of defeat, repression, and changing social conditions.

The debate focused on a number of issues, such as whether traditional anarchist strategies (such as spontaneous insurrection or anti-organisationalism) were adequate, how anarchists should relate to mass movements, trade unions, and political organisations, and whether adapting tactics risked diluting anarchist principles or was necessary for survival and effectiveness. Some anarchists focused on preparation for the next, inevitable revolutionary wave, while others thought existing approaches were inadequate to a changed situation. The latter were known as 'revisionists' and the dialogues as the 'revisionist debate.'

This overlapped with a different debate between organisationalists and anti-organisationalists, i.e. regarding whether anarchists should operate in large, coordinated, formal organisations or not. Insurrectionists and illegalists were usually also anti-organisationalists, and both sides saw a need for more education or awareness-raising. Organisationalists blamed faith in spontaneous revolt for failure, with some suggesting that people were drawn to anarchism for the fight rather than the goals, only to later be lost to fascism or communism.

Malatesta argued that anarchists are too few to achieve anarchism and need to create conditions for it, by supporting other progressive groups such as communists and socialists as a transitional step, and also using gradualist methods such

as education, propaganda, and trade union activity. In France, this position led to some anarchists voting in the 1924 elections. Anti-organisationalists rejected Malatesta's approach as an ideological hardening or even as a takeover by Bolsheviks. In Argentina, Garcia Berlan argued that anarchist theory needed to be revised to do away with ideas of a good human nature. However, his intervention was light on alternatives and substantial critique, and was largely ignored in favour of Malatesta's tactical revisionism.

Overall, the organisationalists came out on top, and moved towards a focus on winning mass support and on education and propaganda. They worked within narrow legal limits and distanced themselves from "terrorism." However, the author suggests that the debate did nothing to resolve the conflict, instead indicating the need for the two sides to follow separate paths.

The article emphasizes that this was not a purely Italian discussion. Through anarchist newspapers, correspondence, and exile networks, the transnational debate spread to France, Switzerland, the United States, Cuba, Uruguay, and Argentina (albeit centred on Italy and partly involving the Italian diaspora). While shared concerns united participants, responses varied according to national political contexts and levels of repression.

What it means for radicals: The organisationalist debate and the issue of acting versus propagandizing are still with us, and left-anarchist organisations, like Black Rose, AFed, etc., are largely continuations of the revisionism of the 1920s. Their rather sparse long-term achievements indicate that their apparent realism was in fact misguided. They became entrapped in an unrewarding, unenjoyable, unsustainable long-term chore of trying to proselytize and recruit for a movement towards an anarchism which remains somewhere beyond the horizon, while taking part in limited legal actions which do not prefigure the goal. Since they have little to show for the actuality of

their vision, and little to offer in the here-and-now, their propaganda wins few converts, and this makes the process even more unrewarding and alienating. In addition, people I've met from these groups are often themselves not particularly anarchist in their orientations. They have some social conservative views, are intolerant of certain forms of difference, and share key aspects of normie "common sense," not just tactically but in their own beliefs. Their anarchy seems to have been sapped away. I'm sure this is not true of everyone in these groups, but it suggests that the strategic vision is lacking in power.

Deferred gratification is not wrong or illogical as such, but it is all too often a Trojan horse for phantasms. Pursuing the same goal by more indirect means is not a renunciation of the goal. However, the more intermediate steps are added, the easier it becomes to be trapped into activities which do not in fact lead to the desired goal. Without a direct connection to the goal, actions are often disconnected from desire and the imaginary, and become routinized and ideological. The goal retreats to the field of ideals and is deferred to an ever more distant future. Pragmatic adaptation is often a trap, because what seem superficially to be strategically effective methods are actually only effective because they are incentivized or facilitated by non-anarchist actors for authoritarian purposes. IMO the best way to think about strategy is infrapolitically, using James Scott's approach and related ideas such as those of Hakim Bey and Colin Ward.

Image from CrimethInc.

While the author tends to frame the issue in terms of purism versus revision, there was evident disagreement in the debates as to what were core anarchist principles or beliefs and what were simply matters of tactics. Revisionists tended to conceive anarchist principles in terms of a goal, meaning that present actions could be modified to strategically pursue the goal. They accepted a type of bureaucratic goal-rationality as compatible with anarchism and also as true. Anti-revisionists saw partic-

taking direct action, it has clearly become a fetish which binds its holder to others' reactionary prejudices as a check on their own thought and action.

ular types of action as inherent in anarchism, and saw strategic changes as corruption of anarchism by authoritarian forces. They had a more radical critique of the subordination of means to ends. Organisation has alienating effects and is unfriendly to difference. Organisations are also more easily infiltrated and repressed, or captured by power-players, than are loose networks.

What's more, pragmatic adaptation turned out to be fad-chasing. Organisationalism was fashionable far beyond anarchism in the 1920s, the era in which Bolshevization of the communist parties occurred, fascism emerged, and Fordism started to spread as a production model. In historical context, the move towards organisationalism was an adoption of the newly arising Fordist social arrangement within anarchist movements. It was to be repudiated in turn in the 1960s-70s, as the malaise of Fordism became more evident. Today, there is once more a move back towards organisationalism, and towards authoritarian varieties of informal ideological sect reliant on conduct codes and cancel culture. The model in this case is imported from cybernetic control and securitization systems fashionable in this stage of capitalism, and tending to coalesce around something like the Chinese social credit model. This shift has made much of the anarchist movement inhospitable to anyone who is not a rigidly self-controlled conformist with an other-centric ideology, and will no doubt be seen as disastrous in retrospect. It also tends to reward repression with conformity, and to start down a slippery slope of concessions to power which worsen along with the conditions.

I have more sympathy with the anti-organisationalist position, because I've seen in practice how strategic adaptations have led to the gradual abandonment of anarchist orientations in others. One can only achieve a goal by means coherent with it, by prefiguration of the desired future. However, anarchy is also open-minded and needs to take account of empirical obsta-

cles and unexpected aspects of sensuous reality. Revision was needed in 1920s anarchism, but not in the direction of organisationalism. Instead, a move away from faith in the masses' spontaneous common sense was needed, along with a focus on creating and exercising dispersed forms of power, on creating autonomous spaces and networks resilient to repression, and on the types of subversion of dominant meanings found in Situationism. The formula to destroy Fordist capitalism was eventually discovered in 1968, but in the 1920s, the systemic nature of Fordist shifts was not yet obvious to everyone.

A similar adaptation to neoliberal conditions led to the Third Way. Today, similar processes involve revisions which bring authoritarian cybernetic control, securitization, normative policing, and similar aspects of the current composition of dominant systems inside anarchist movements. Trends like postanarchism and idpol anarchism are constructed as revisionist, "strategic" adaptations which pursue the same anarchist principles (now usually glossed as "compassion," "solidarity," "respect" and the like) in changed conditions, or with due recognition of new theoretical developments. This has again led to a very un-anarchist anarchism, in which authoritarian thought- and language-policing, inverted prejudice and discrimination, behaviour codes, and intolerance of radical difference proliferate, and in which legalism has drawn anarchists into collaboration with the police-state.

Anarchists today have increasingly been reduced to the role of street support for liberal or authoritarian statists, particularly in their struggles against fascist and neoconservative forces, and as enforcers of idpol-led puritanism, sometimes with a side of free provision of social services in a charity-like manner. In return for taking great risks in these struggles, they receive no protection and very little support from the so-called centre-left in power. They come to accept neoliberalism through continual exposure to its systems. Some are drawn into highly complicit roles in the system, for example

as teachers in authoritarian schools. With this reformist focus, they neglect to create autonomy or resilient networks, to drop-out, to create alternative lifeways, to experiment with alternative ways of living, etc. This is a line of recuperation, not a mere tactical shift: the McDonaldisation of anarchism.

The appeal of this new revisionism is much the same as in the earlier incorporation of Fordism: neoliberal and cybernetic control systems seem to work well, they are novel and might therefore seem progressive, they have the aura of a rising fad, they seem realistic and conform to the way the world works, and therefore they are favoured as the most effective means to realize particular anarchist goals. In fact they are technologies in Ellul's sense, which contain a dynamic of their own which is more powerful than the motives of those who put them to work, and which do not realize the desired ends for this reason.

I don't think it makes much sense to think of anti-organisationalists as puritans, especially when these tended to be the more tolerant, less moralizing, more diverse strands of anarchism. Indeed, these are also the strands of anarchism which had already revised or rejected the anarcho-communist orthodoxy. The question is not whether to revise or not, but whether a given revision is a new detournement or a recuperation. It might make more sense to say that left-anarchists were faced with a choice between their commitment to horizontalism, voluntarism, difference, immediacy, and etc. – in short, to anarchism – and their commitment to the idealized normie masses as a revolutionary force. Once they realized that normies were not already anarchists and not about to become so in the passion of a revolutionary wave, they had to make a choice. They chose to adapt to the non-anarchism of normies and to focus on appealing to them, educating them, and engaging in propaganda. There's nothing wrong with trying to raise others' awareness, but when it becomes part of a revolutionary teleology, and when it leads someone to side with ignorant normies against other anarchists who are