

Re-Thinking Revolution

A Social Anarchist Perspective

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Superseding archic society requires, in part, a refusal to participate in dominant social relations. Anarchists call for a refusal to surrender people's collective power to politicians or bosses. Instead they seek to re-organize social institutions in such a way as to reclaim social and economic power and exercise it on their own behalves towards their own collective interests. They seek an alternative social infrastructure that is responsive to people's needs because it is developed and controlled directly by them. This is a social framework in which decisions regarding social and economic relations are made by the people affected by them. Such an approach takes a firm stand against the authority vested in politicians and their corporate masters. It also speaks against the hierarchical arrangements that exemplify major institutions such as workplaces, schools, churches and even the family.

Large-scale civil non-co-operation and or militant confrontation with the state and capital obviously require previous successes in organization and experience. Thus, as Ehrlich (1996b) notes, these are necessarily the outward, and dramatic, manifestations of ongoing experiments in overcoming archic society. First, anarchists must develop alternative institutions. These are the infrastructures of resistance (Shantz 2010), the building blocks of what Ehrlich (1996a) refers to as the anarchist transfer culture, an approximation of the new society within the context of the old. Within them anarchists try to meet the basic demands of building sustainable communities.

A transfer culture is that agglomeration of ideas and practices that guide people in making the trip from the society here to the society there in the future....As part of the accepted wisdom of that transfer culture we understand that we may never achieve anything that goes beyond the culture itself. It may be, in fact, that it is the very nature of anarchy that we shall always be building the new society within whatever society we find ourselves (Ehrlich, 1996a: 329).

Anarchist transfer cultures express "elements of refusal" or non-co-operation with authority. Anarchists thereby attempt to undermine the State by refusing to obey its demands. This is more than simple civil disobedience since it also contains a positive character along with a defensive one. It requires the development of infrastructures by which real alternatives might be posed. It also suggests a rethinking of conventional notions of revolution, one in which revolution is presented as an ongoing process rather than a specific moment of rupture and points to the incredible groundwork that needs to be laid before talk of revolution or radical social transformation can have any meaning in the current period.

Conceptualized as an event with specific temporality, as something for a future time, revolution appears distant.

Todd Gitlin writing about SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] and the new left of the sixties said at the time that if we failed it would be a "failure of nerve." Perhaps he was right, then. But today I would say that if we fail it will have been a failure of imagination. Most people have no sense of how to move outside the present – even in their imagination (Ehrlich, 1996b: 341).

This is a view of revolution as a process of constructing alternative forms of sociation as models of a new society.

Revolution is a process, and even the eradication of coercive institutions will not automatically create a liberatory society. We create that society by building new institutions, by changing the character of our social relationships, by changing ourselves – and throughout that process by changing the distribution of power in society....

If we cannot begin this revolutionary project here and now, then we cannot make a revolution (Ehrlich, DeLeon and Morris, 1996: 5).

These infrastructures of resistance and revolutionary transfer cultures, which operate in the shadows of the old dominant institutions, provide frameworks for the revolutionary organization of social relations in a miniature, pre-insurrectionary, form. It is the rudimentary infrastructure of alternative ways of being, an alternative future in the present. It is decidedly not a millenarian project in which hopes for liberation or freedom are deferred or projected into some imagined future. Rather than utopian longings, these transfer cultures or futures in the present express what social theorist Michel Foucault calls heterotopias, real world practices in which utopian desires are given life in the here and now.

Re-thinking revolution

In conventional political theory, revolutionary as well as conservative, revolution is defined typically as the event of insurrection, generally when some group of subordinates ousts their erstwhile overlords. This establishes a point of rupture following which social reality is fundamentally and irrevocably transformed. The period of reconstruction following the revolution, in which new institutions, values and social practices are developed, often in the face of counter-revolution from the recently deposed elites, may also be included as existing within the revolutionary era.

The period prior to the outbreak of active and open insurrection is generally not viewed as a part of the revolutionary period. While people may, during this time, be involved in smaller scale struggles or have access to revolutionary education or propaganda, they are not, according to orthodox approaches, involved in the everyday work of rebuilding society. Such tasks are almost by definition part of a post-revolutionary period. Related to this way of thinking about revolutions is that, perhaps most importantly for the present discussion, revolution is inextricably bound to a statist framework and “the” revolution consists invariably or exclusively in the seizure of state power.

Rather than a violent overthrow of the State in a destructive Revolution, contemporary anarchists are more likely to pursue constructive paths to social transformation through the creation of free zones and libertarian social relations. This involves a vast range of different tactics ranging from conventional means such as demonstrations, boycotts, sabotage, occupations or strikes to less familiar means such as poetic terrorism or electronic civil disobedience. Each tactic involves “propaganda of the deed”; an educational practice which not only shows that things can be done differently but offers practical examples and lessons learned. As Graeber (2004: 44–45) reminds us, “unless we are willing to massacre thousands of people (and probably even then), the revolution will almost certainly not be quite such a clean break as such a phrase [as “after the revolution”] implies.”

For anarchists, the fatal consequences deriving from an absence of infrastructures of resistance and revolutionary transfer cultures have historically been shown in case after case, from France

to Russia to China and beyond. If people are not prepared, and somewhat experienced, in terms of organizing and managing social relations they will have difficulty developing a new society in egalitarian and participatory directions, turning instead to leaders offering to coordinate change on their behalf.

When these small groups of “vanguards” come to manage revolutionary undertakings, people become dependent on them. In turning to vanguardist leaders people are to some extent expressing their lack of confidence, skills, knowledge or resources to make and carry out communal decisions. Even beyond this, once a vanguard assumes power it becomes extremely difficult to carry out popular education and skill or resource sharing. Where vanguardists take up post-revolutionary tasks of popular education it is typically from their own ideological perspective. The revolution’s character will reflect the usually centralized position of the new ruling group.

Significantly the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of vanguardist leaderships and the post-revolutionary societies they lead are not necessarily imposed on populations. To some extent they become default positions of the population where people feel unprepared to organize and construct viable alternatives. Active experiences of self-management and self-organization are necessary not only for contesting instituted authorities prior to any insurrection but also for resisting dependence on any leadership vanguards during and after insurrectionary periods.

Anarchists have always emphasized people’s capacities for spontaneous organization but they also recognize that what appears to be “spontaneous” develops from an often extensive groundwork of pre-existing practices. Without pre-existing revolutionary practices and relationships, or transfer cultures, people are left to patch things together in the heat of social upheaval or to defer to previously organized and disciplined vanguards. Pre-existing revolutionary infrastructures, or transfer cultures, are necessary components of popular, participatory and liberatory social re-organization.

Anarchists suggest that a liberatory revolution requires experiences of active involvement in radical change, prior to any insurrection, and the development of prior structures for constructing a new society within the shell of the old society. Anarchists would suggest that a starting point for re-thinking what revolutions might consist of is to stop conceiving of revolution as though it was a thing or a moment of rupture. Graeber (2004: 45) argues that taking such an approach might allow us to ask instead, “what is revolutionary action?” He then offers the following as part of an answer:

[R]evolutionary action is any collective action which rejects, and therefore confronts, some form of power or domination and in doing so, reconstitutes social relations – even within the collectivity – in that light. Revolutionary action does not necessarily have to aim to topple governments. Attempts to create autonomous communities in the face of power...would, for instance, be almost by definition revolutionary acts. And history shows us that the continual accumulation of such acts can change (almost) everything (Graeber, 2004: 45).

Some anarchists have, rather sloppily, chosen to describe contemporary anarchist practices as “dual power” strategies, applying, without irony, the term used by Lenin and Trotsky. Anarchists generally use the term dual power to suggest the idea that at some point anarchist projects will reach such size and scope that they will offer a plausible challenge or alternative to the state. This alternative, if not rendering the state obsolete, will provide the base from which the state might be abolished.

In typical revolutionary discourse a “counterpower” is a collection of social institutions set in opposition to the state and capital: from self-governing communities to radical labor unions to popular militias. Sometimes it is also referred to as an “anti-power.” When such institutions maintain themselves in the face of the state, this is usually referred to as a “dual power” situation. By this definition most of human history is actually characterized by dual power situations, since few historical states had the means to root such institutions out, even assuming that they would have wanted to (Graeber, 2004: 24–25).

The term “dual power” was used by Lenin in an April 9, 1917 article “The Dual Power,” which was published in *Pravda*. Lenin defined the dual power, which consisted of popular institutions, the Soviets, as an incipient government that was growing alongside the official Provisional Government during the revolution. While the Provisional Government formed the government of the bourgeoisie, the dual power “government” of the Soviets consisted of popular organs that provided the constructive framework of a new post-bourgeois society.

Significantly, as history would show, Lenin conceived of dual power as a mechanism by which the vanguard party could implement and enforce party control over the revolution. Lenin stated famously that the proletariat needed state power, that a centralized organization of force was required to lead the mass of people in the work of organizing a socialist society. Rather than an aspect of self-determination, or popular control of the revolution, the dual power structures served as a means of co-optation and centralization via the party within the state. Towards the end of 1917, with the Bolsheviks in power, Lenin finally ended the already shrinking autonomy of the Soviets, shifting all authority in political and economic matters to the newly instituted Bolshevik government. While the Soviets did certainly play an important part in the empowerment and education of workers in Russia it is also true that authority rested with the Bolshevik Party itself.

Rather than use the term dual power, I prefer to speak of infrastructures of resistance or anarchist transfer cultures understood as acts of self-valorization, or working for the needs of oneself or one’s community rather than for capital (capitalist valorization). While the notion of infrastructures of resistance or anarchist transfer cultures might bear some resemblance to the idea of dual power, it is important to recognize the rather significant differences both in terms of form and substance.

Various alternative institutions, whether free schools or squats, alternative unions and workers centres or counter-media, form networks as means for developing alternative social infrastructures. Where free schools join up with worker co-operatives and collective social centres, alternative social infrastructures, or anarchist transfer cultures, become visible at least at the community level. Contemporary anarchist projects are still quite new. None have approached the scale that would suggest they pose practical alternatives, except perhaps in the case of new media activities. Yet all are putting together the building blocks that might contribute to the development of practical alternatives that extend well beyond even the projects that initially gave birth to them.

The missing link?: Heterotopias and class

Many critics, most notably Murray Bookchin (1996), have argued that prefigurative anarchist practices lend themselves primarily to subcultural expressions or what he terms “lifestyle anarchism.” Lifestyle anarchism, in Bookchin’s view, while making participants feel good, leaves capitalist structures, especially the market economy and private control of productive resources, untouched. Bookchin’s concerns are certainly credible. Any movement that exists primarily as a counter-cultural expression faces the well known threats of co-optation, as elements of the counter culture are commodified and corralled by the logic of capitalist exchange, reduced to empty symbols of themselves for easy consumption (as has happened to hippies, punk and hip hop to name only a few) or marginalization, as the counter-cultures are simply ignored or tolerated, left to “do their own thing.”

Yet I would argue that once one looks past the surface of anarchist heterotopias one finds interesting aspects of what one might call class struggle or anti-capitalism. While these practices may appear as strange in relation to more familiar manifestations of class struggle, such as strikes or boycotts, they actually show everyday practices by which the logic of capitalist valorization is subverted, contested and refused. I would argue that much of the controversy over heterotopian anarchist practices relates to the too easy focus on their cultural or symbolic aspects. At the same time, anarchist notions of transfer cultures actually reflect attempts to restore the economy to its proper place as simply one aspect of culture, rather than as a privileged sphere separated from and predominating over all of the other aspects of culture, as is currently the case under capitalism. Yet practices such as free schools and community or social centres, child care networks, alternative unions and rank-and-file networks, squats, and community gardens offer starting points for building social resources, solidarity and points for contesting capitalist valorization (providing possible alternatives to the labour market and the production of value for capital).

If there is one area in which anarchist theory has been under-developed it is in terms of analyses of capitalism and the relationship of class struggle with social change. Much anarchist analysis recently emphasizes the experiences of people as consumers confronting alienated products rather than, the greater concern of Marxists, producers alienated from their products and from the labour process itself. This reflects more than an omission and may, in fact be a conscious oversight by some anarchists.

Conclusion

Anarchists suggest that people should be organizationally prepared for revolutionary struggles and transformation, not only intellectually prepared. There is a real need for political and economic organization suited to meeting people’s immediate needs while managing the equitable provision of resources across communities. Anarchist heterotopias serve as means by which people can sustain radical social change both before, during, and after insurrectionary periods.

As anarchists suggest, whether an insurrection occurs tomorrow, next week or in one hundred years, people can act as if the revolution is underway today. Waiting until after an insurrection to exercise power over our lives means nothing less than a postponement of our liberation. People can participate in liberatory economic and social relations immediately and can begin

re-organizing society now. There is no need to wait for the bosses and politicians to abandon history's stage first.

Anarchist infrastructures of resistance encourage people to create alternative social spaces or heterotopias within which liberatory institutions, practices and relationships can be nurtured. Infrastructures of resistance include the beginnings of economic and political self-management through the creation of institutions which can encourage a broader social transformation while also providing some of the conditions for personal and collective sustenance and growth in the present. This is about changing the world, not by taking power, but by creating opportunities for the exercise of people's own personal and collective power.

Anarchist infrastructures sustain situations in which specific communities create economic and social systems that operate, as much as possible, as working alternatives to the dominant state capitalist structures. Anarchist infrastructures are organized around alternative institutions that offer at least a starting point for meeting community needs such as food, housing, communications, energy, transportation, child care, education and so on. These institutions are autonomous from, and indeed opposed to, dominant relations and institutions of the state and capital as well as "official" organs of the working class such as unions or political parties. In the short term these institutions contest official structures, with an eye towards, in the longer term, replacing them. These are the anarchist transfer cultures.

Anarchists do not seek uncritical allegiance to alternative institutions but rather active, engaged participation within them. Within discussions of transfer cultures the expectation is that at some point the alternative institutions will reach a critical mass such that there will exist two parallel social systems vying for people's support. Anarchists are a very long way from that point however and there should be no illusions about the status of such infrastructures in the current period.

While much work highlights anarchists applying their principles and practices to areas that they know best, such as housing, communications, education and welfare, it is clear that much remains to be done. Taking up Colin Ward's (2003) suggestion, one might well ask: "Where are the anarchist experts on medicine, health services, agriculture and economics?"

A problem for any visionary politics remains that the present imposes itself relentlessly upon the future. It is always necessary to remember that these self-valorizing activities are marked by their emergence within the shell of capitalism. The history of this birth scars them. It also presses in against them to limit their range and scope and to corrode their capacities to be sustained.

At same time advocates of immediatist or heterotopian anarchy argue that, since there is no way to know whether an insurrection will occur, or if it will be successful, it is worthwhile to create situations in the present that approximate the sorts of relations in which we would like to live. The creation of alternative institutions and relationships, which express our more far-reaching visions, is desirable in and of itself. It is important to liberate or create space within which we might live more free and secure lives today, not only to build a new society.

Not surprisingly for a perspective that emphasizes the connectivity between means and ends, anarchist thinking about organizations is in many ways related to anarchist notions of revolution.

And that, since anarchists are not actually trying to seize power within any national territory, the process of one system replacing the other will not take the form of some sudden revolutionary cataclysm – the storming of a Bastille, the seizing of a Winter Palace – but will necessarily be gradual, the creation of alternative forms of organization on a world scale, new forms of com-

munication, new, less alienated ways of organizing life, which will, eventually, make currently existing forms of power seem stupid and beside the point (Graeber, 2004: 40).

There are of course limits to this approach and despite the agreement that most anarchists would have with Graeber regarding the seizing of power within a national territory many would disagree vehemently with the idea that alternative forms of organization gradually replacing archaic forms of power is somehow enough. Many anarchist communists would suggest that if at any point these alternatives actually come to pose a threat to existing forms of power they will be met with, likely extreme, acts of military violence. Such spaces, according to anarchist communists, will need to be defended. Indeed the conflict over the continued existence of these anarchic spaces, or indeed over the continuation of archaic forms of power, may well produce the very forms of sudden revolutionary cataclysm that Graeber denies.

At the same time Murray Bookchin was surely correct in suggesting that building alternative institutions cannot be enough. It must also be necessary to resist and oppose dominant institutions and organizations which will certainly seek to control, subvert or cancel any alternative institutions that actually do become strong enough to threaten the dominant structures. It is not enough to ignore the hegemonic institutions, as some anarchists might hope. Their capacities and strengths must also be corroded and diminished.

How long these projects might endure and sustain themselves is a question beyond the scope of this work. Some have collapsed already. Others continue and thrive. Still others have evolved or transformed into something different than that from which they originated. Almost all have given birth to other new projects. Most have encouraged some participation in previously existing projects, often those rooted in specific community struggles such as anti-poverty or housing work. Overall, however, the freedom experienced and nurtured in such spaces is often quite fragile and tenuous as I have tried to illustrate.

The perspectives and practices of constructive anarchy, in striving to address immediate day-to-day concerns, provide an important reminder to revolutionary anarchists that anarchists must offer examples that resonate with people's experiences and needs. Additionally, any movement that fails to offer alternative and reliable organizational spaces and practices will be doomed to marginalization and failure. Or as Herzen has remarked: "A goal which is infinitely remote is not a goal at all, it is a deception" (quoted in Ward, 2004: 32).

Ivan Illich, whose works have had some influence within anarchist circles, refers to autonomous capacities as "vernacular subsistence." By vernacular subsistence Illich means "autonomous values and practices through which people have satisfied their everyday needs despite and against the depredations of the 'economy'" (Cleaver, 1992: 124). Anarchists suggest that the majority of people in a society such as the United States and Canada owe their very survival to everyday activities of "vernacular subsistence."

It is this struggle over the self-liberation of creative living labour that is embodied and expressed in the anarchist striving for autonomy in various spheres of activity. These subsistence practices or infrastructures of resistance point the way towards the development of real world alternatives to capitalism. The challenge remains how such subsistence activities might allow for the creation of greater spaces for their autonomous development and the extension of such infrastructures into growing spheres of life. There is an ongoing push and pull between forces driving towards disvalorization or the channeling of productive energies into capitalism and the forces working for autonomous development. What is perhaps most interesting is that, against

the fears of the Critical Theorists who saw recuperation and incorporation everywhere, such autonomous subjects repeatedly arise even from within the expanded grasp of capitalist control and the colonization of everyday life.

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[Thank you Jeff for the first of other contributions to come]

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