

Basic terms of anarchist thought

Jonathan Eibisch

ethical values: *variety – equality – social freedom – solidarity – self-determination*

organizational principles: *decentralization – horizontality – voluntariness – federalism – autonomy*

theoretical concepts: *plurality – cooperation – communal individuality – voluntary agreement – self-organization*

criteria für social-revolutionary orientation: *emancipation – radicalism – prefiguration – confrontation - initiative*

Theory should be applied practically. Therefore, the following scheme serves to provide an applied theoretical foundation about anarchism - away from often detached academic contexts and sometimes self-referential Marxist debates. In fact, certain practices or perspectives do not follow from anarchist theory. Conversely, it is the experiences of activists in social movements that shape anarchist thought. Its basic concepts have been developed over what is now almost a two-century history of modern European anarchism. Values such as equality and freedom, organizing principles such as decentralization and autonomy, and concepts such as free agreement and cooperation have been used in this way for over 150 years. And there are reasons why even people who are just becoming active today come back to these concepts. Their truth is grounded in our reflected experiences.

This means that they cannot be applied as a rigid dogmatic system or simply followed like a plan. Instead, it is always a matter of rediscovering and exchanging what we understand by the respective terms - how we can fill them with life and apply them concretely to criticize the existing social form and order of domination and to describe where we want to go instead. This is especially important for anarchists because they assume that desirable alternatives already exist in the here and now and can be expanded through strategies of interstices. What we strive for as a whole should therefore already be implemented in our social movements, contexts and environments. In doing so, it is not necessary to envisage rigid and superhuman goals, which we will never achieve anyway. Rather, the goals can also change as we move toward them along tortuous paths. Instead of the conservative notion of "adherence to principles," we need continuous, joint, and open discussion processes to shape them.

With the scheme unfolded here, it is thus a matter of gaining orientation in uncertain times, of locating oneself in a certain tradition, and of becoming aware that anarchist theory actually exists

- which, as mentioned, is not a idealistic construction, but is developed in collective processes of reflection and discussion over a long period. Our consciousness is necessarily always shaped by the ideology and experiences of the contemporary form of society and is therefore permeated by contradictions. Those result from the fact that reality is complex and that we as individuals or groups can only ever grasp partial truths. But contradictions also arise from the conflict with the ideology of the ruling order.

With emancipatory conceptions, we aim not merely to depict these contradictions, but to raise them to a higher level. We can succeed in this if we understand the tensions involved as paradoxes, which, like the concepts presented, cannot be conclusively fixed as truths, or should be fixed once at all. In the concepts of interstices, concrete utopia, direct action, social revolution, but also in anarchist debates about individualism and collectivism, violence, alienation, or technology, a paradoxical way of thinking is formed - which can be very profitable to make a social-revolutionary project conceivable today.

In creating the scheme, it seemed obvious to me to start from the anarchist ethics. This does not exclude to take a materialistic world view as a basis, e.g. to assume that class relations are extremely effective, that private property has to be abolished and the means of production have to be socialized, as well as to understand that our consciousness is essentially shaped by the material arrangement of the world and the disposal of it. It is just that it is not shaped one-sidedly and one-dimensionally, but varies, is complex, and allows room for maneuver. With that in mind, the proposed catalog of terms is to be understood as an orientation framework for an application-oriented (anti-)political theory of anarchism. Like all schemes, the selection and arrangement of terms reduces reality. On the other hand, it would be quite a gain if at least they were more generally disseminated among anarchists and filled with specific content through common discussion.

The basic concepts presented here can of course be supplemented and expanded. But if we lead common discussions about this alone, or structure our existing discussions with sharpened terms, this would already raise the consciousness in anarchist scenes. As I said before, this is not about being bossy, but about a common understanding, to which all participants should be enabled, in order to be able to have a say.

I have arranged the terms in a system to make it clear that they are interrelated. On the horizontal level, this means that social freedom can only be had with equality and solidarity, and diversity only with self-determination. Therefore, solidary behavior, for example, can only be lived in recognition of diverse differences. Organizationally, decentralization, autonomy and horizontality, federalism, and voluntarism absolutely belong together. That is why, for example, the emphasis on decentralization does not mean that tasks are not transferred to a supraregional level. Voluntariness in this sense is not individualistic isolationism, as in liberalism. Of course, this also leads to tensions. But these exist in the reality of our lives and the form of society in which we live itself, and are thus only thematized. Thus, the theoretical concepts and the criteria for a social-revolutionary orientation are also connected in each case.

On the vertical level, it should at least be implied that anarchist ethics with organizational principles and theoretical concepts is mediated in both directions. In order to live in diversity, decentralized forms of organization and a theoretical preoccupation with plurality are needed. Only voluntariness enables the implementation of social freedom and leads to thinking about communal individuality. By autonomy I mean an organizing principle that is so valuable because it transitions into the self-determination of individuals and the concept of social self-organization.

This is important because it is precisely not the anarchist way of thinking and approach that autonomous communities seal themselves off and then elect a tyrant, oppress women or beat children. This would violate basic ethical values. Similarly, equality is to be understood only formally, as in an electoral process, but to be realized as a profound relationship based on the assumption of cooperation and implemented through horizontal forms of organization. As already said, this conceptual system must not be understood stubbornly as a program that simply has to be implemented. Therefore, the respective concepts are not always exactly transferable into each other. But this overview can initiate a reflection on what anarchists and people sympathizing with them are already doing.

Finally, I would like to disclose that I developed this systematization from a particular perspective. My perspective is that of anarchist synthesis and anarchism without adjectives. This is no better than other perspectives, for example, from anarchist mutualism, individualism, communism, insurrectionalism, syndicalism, or communitarianism. The synthesis is merely an attempt to incorporate the best points formulated by adherents of the respective currents and to bring them into conversation with each other. Thus, the following terms are also a proposal to establish common ground in an otherwise extremely plural anarchism - whose interpretation, conclusions, approaches, and practices can still vary widely.

Of course, it makes a difference whether one organizes in grassroots unions, affinity groups, or cooperatives; whether one considers labor struggles, destructive acts, or neighborhood assemblies as appropriate means to directly change conditions. There are discussions to be had and arguments to be had about this. Likewise, it is not simply clear what really proves to be radical, emancipatory, prefigurative, confrontational, and initiative in the long run. Further reflection is also needed regarding our ideas and assumptions about relations of domination and desirable alternatives to it.

However, under a form of domination that divides us by identities and through the brutalization of (anti-)political disputes, we tend to want to be right above all and to impose our views on others instead of respecting each other, listening to each other and relating to each other. We allow ourselves to be divided by authoritarians who want to assert their claims to power with set truths, instead of embarking together on a search for truths that are linked to our various realities of life - and providing tools to change them. This precisely does not mean defining terms arbitrarily or in a purely instrumental way, but rather locating them in long emancipatory traditions and thus agreeing on shared goals. To dedicate oneself to these tasks is at the same time the way to become social-revolutionary together.

A brief description of the respective values follows. This is abbreviated and should therefore stimulate reflection and further discussion...

ethical values

Equality has a material, a political and an ethical component: All people unconditionally receive the resources to shape their own lives. It is about giving them an equal say in the decisions that affect them. And it is about establishing equal dignity for all persons.

Social freedom is a relationship in which individuals shape their lives in relation to others and thereby become special individuals in the first place. In order to develop this, boundaries are also respectfully crossed and explored. There is no real freedom for individuals at the expense of others.

Solidarity is both the starting point and the result of social struggles. It describes the cohesion of people who help each other, even without being friends and liking each other. Solidarity happens especially when people in difficult situations are supported and privileges are given up.

Self-determination emphasizes the will and the specificity of individuals who have control over their lives, their activities and their bodies. Because of the inequality under the ruling order, it is first to be fought for by all.

Variety: A libertarian-socialist society allows for diverse forms of life. Likewise, variety is to be welcomed in social movements and our environments today. However, variety in the anarchist sense does not succeed through the domineering construction of identities and liberal multiculturalism, but rather through individual groups and communities defining themselves.

organizational principles

Horizontality means organization at eye level. In mutual respect, forms are realized in which as many people as possible are heard and included. To this end, it is necessary to create media for the communication of interests, concerns and opinions.

Autonomy means that each group that comes together decides for itself what activities it will pursue, what positions it will take and how exactly it will structure itself, instead of adopting prefabricated concepts or tasks that others have set. Autonomy is also linked to the exodus from relations of domination with the simultaneous implementation of alternatives.

Federalism is the federation of decentralized, autonomous groups and communities. Instead of being exclusively concerned with their own local affairs, they relate to each other, exchange ideas and make decisions at a higher level in order to be stronger together.

Voluntariness: No one should be forced to belong to a group, to take on certain tasks or defined roles in it. Voluntariness is important because it also tests the limits of the individual. In case of doubt, this means leaving a group or putting its foundations up for renegotiation. But if the degree of voluntariness is high, the group is also stable, strong, and can continue to develop.

Decentralization: Anarchists assume that most social functions and also social movements are better organized in a decentralized way. Centralization is not emancipatory because it always means a concentration of power. How exactly decentralization can be implemented varies from area to area - it does not happen by itself, but has to be established.

Theoretical concepts

The concept of **cooperation** is based on the assumption that human beings are social beings who can only develop themselves and create the conditions for a good life for all by working together. Nevertheless, cooperation is not a law of nature, but must be practiced and extended.

With **communal individuality**, an attempt is made to make it conceivable how the apparent opposition of individuals and collectives can be dismantled. It is necessary to create communities in which individuals are not forced, but likewise to orientate individuals towards becoming communal.

The **voluntary agreement** between individuals and groups is directed against the bourgeois contract, in which coercive instances decide who has the right and which claims in case of doubt and enforce them. Instead, the participants clarify their own affairs and renegotiate them in the event of disagreement. This does not preclude them from bringing in external groups to monitor and evaluate their processes.

Self-organization is a term that has only been used since the 1950s, but aptly describes what anarchists assumed even before then. Similar to systems in nature, society could organize itself without a separate state. Nevertheless, this is not a law of nature, but means that spaces and forms of self-organization have to be actively established.

Plurality: How can variety be made possible and decentralization organized? This is to be thought through with the concept of plurality, with which it is also sought what common foundations are needed so that variety becomes possible at all without lapsing into arbitrariness or separatism.

Social-revolutionary criteria

Emancipation: Social movements should be emancipatory in the sense that groups that are differently affected by exploitation, oppression, alienation and destruction empower themselves to change society. It is not for those affected, but through them, that decisive change occurs. In this process, individuals change individually, groups change individually, and society as a whole changes. This must be thought together and not played off against each other.

Radicalism: In anarchism, there is a long and ongoing debate about the relationship between ends and means. According to this, the end does not justify the methods, but both should correspond to each other as far as possible. However, in contradiction with the existing order of domination, it is not enough for means to become ends in themselves and thus evade debate. From these considerations the approach of direct action was developed, which justifies the radicality of social movements. Social critique is thus practically applied.

Prefiguration: Anarchists assume that utopia is concrete and immanently present. That is, it is not projected in other places or times, but is the repressed and excluded in contemporary society that manifests itself in our longing for something else. For this reason, there is a plea for action in the here and now. If social conditions are to change fundamentally, it is important to start today and where we are. Prefiguration means the experimental anticipation of the generally aspired forms and relations.

Confrontation: There is a comprehensive discussion with different points of view regarding the relationship between negation and construction. For social revolution, the two belong together: In order to act according to the possibilities of the found conditions, these are to be attacked. From this approach of dissolving construction, social movements should seek confrontation. This can take on different forms depending on the situation and constellation.

Initiative: Anarchism rejects the approach of an avant-garde leading social movements with a trained ideology and closed cadre groups. Instead, the oppressed and exploited should empower themselves. However, in order to organize and fight purposefully, certain conditions are needed, including time, education, convictions, and affiliation. Since the conditions are distributed very differently, anarchists want to accompany, motivate and orient social movements. They form a kind of "convoyer-garde", take initiative, but also try to stimulate this in others.

Power relations and their alternatives

State / Federation of Decentralized Autonomous Communities

In the state, the political relationship of domination is condensed, which in modernity is connected with the nation as a constructed community of coercion. It functions according to the principles of authoritarianism, centralization and hierarchization and extends these into all areas of society. Thus, at the same time, the state is held together as a collection of different institutions

that monopolize the political and assign it to themselves. Although at its core the state is based on naked force and direct subjugation, it also assumes different functions of caring, redistributing, and organizing public infrastructure. As a result, it is hard for many to imagine that we would live better without the state.

As a counter-model, many anarchists strive for a federation of decentralized autonomous communes. This is closely related to the council democracy. Instead of a caste of professional politicians, committed people are assigned tasks in their respective communities. The exercise of these mandates is controlled and rotated. This model is not a constructed ideal, but results from the reality of parallel structures that exist everywhere. If this model is implemented on a larger scale, mechanisms must be created to ensure that power is not continuously distributed so that it does not take on state characteristics again.

Capitalism / decentralized socialism

Capitalism is an economic relationship of domination based on private property, the appropriation of common property, and the voluntary compulsion of wage labor. Capitalism necessarily entails a class society that is self-defeating without state compensation, such as the principle of profit maximization. Because it has created incredible wealth through exploitation of labor and nature, it has also succeeded in pacifying large sections of the workingclass. Its consequences are anything but social, sustainable, or effective, but capitalism has the ability to flexibly adapt and incorporate resistance to it.

In contrast, many anarchists strive for decentralized socialism. As statist capitalism, this has elements of a planned economy, but leaves it up to individual actors to decide how to respond to requests for the production or distribution of goods. Furthermore, decentralized socialism is based on different cooperatives in which people organize their needs for food, clothing, housing, education and culture collectively and locally. In any case, the technical conditions for such an organization of the economy are given. The individual disposal of goods will be less. For it the basic security is ensured, there is substantially more time for everybody order the possibilities after meaningful activities are substantially higher, whereby strenuous and load-carrying work is particularly appreciated.

Patriarchy / egalitarian gender relations

Domination is also reflected in unequal gender relations, and patriarchy has existed in various forms for many millennia and has been enforced worldwide. It involves the privileging of healthy hetero cis men over all people in other positions. A supposed natural superiority is claimed to legitimize it. The fact that patriarchy is an essential relationship of domination can also be seen in the brutal culture war waged by right-wing actors against emancipatory efforts. In part, this succeeds in dividing the category of women from people with other gender identities.

Instead, anarchists advocate for the equal treatment of all people, regardless of gender or desire. This means implementing material concerns such as equal pay and equal labor rights for women, as well as a genuine appreciation and equal distribution of care work and reproductive activities that are pejoratively feminized. Further, there is a need to provide special support to those in minority positions. The construction of gender identity in general is linked to the modern form of society, which categorizes people and in which they have to define themselves. This in itself is problematic, which is why the social construction of gender as such must be problematized.

white supremacy / mutual respect

The emergence of the modern nation-state, like that of capitalism, is linked to racial discrimination and oppression, which, like patriarchy, presses people of different origins and different appearances into categories, ascribes characteristics to them and arranges them in a hierarchy. In the modern era, the enslavement of black people formed one of the economic foundations of capitalist exploitation, which was then transferred to the wage labor relationship. Racism manifests itself in global economic dependencies, poor working conditions, low educational access, ethnic segregation and police violence.

Anarchists want to overcome white supremacy as a social relationship of domination that produces and perpetuates racism. The struggle against it is to be carried out on different levels and also includes the reflection of one's own racist prejudices and behaviors. All people, regardless of their origin, appearance and language, should be accorded the same respect.

Domination of nature / convivial relationship with nature

Man's domination over nature is many thousands of years old, but has increased massively in modern forms of society. Humans place themselves in the center of the cosmos, subordinate all other living beings to them and exploit them for their own purposes. To make this possible, first an artificial separation of "nature" and "culture" is drawn, which is nonsensical, because everything what humans build is processed nature, as they themselves are. Therefore, with the domination of nature, the possibilities of a good life for all people are ultimately undermined.

Anarchists do not want to "return to nature", because this is a projection, but a breaking with the independent technocracy and the anthropocentric worldview. It is necessary to expand a convivial, i.e. reciprocal, social relationship with nature and to fundamentally transform production. Furthermore, a decentering of the human being is needed in order to experience him, contrary to the state of his alienation, in interaction with the world and other living beings.

This article was translated with help from [deepl.com](https://www.deepl.com) and can be corrected. Further inspiration on paradox-a.de

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Jonathan Eibisch
Basic terms of anarchist thought

theanarchistlibrary.org