

# **Socialist Movements, Anarchism and (Anti-)Politics**

**A Plea for a Movement-Anarchism and (Anti)Politics**

Jonathan Eibisch

# Contents

Anarchists and Socialist Movements . . . . .	3
A Movement-Anarchism? . . . . .	4
Approaches for transformation . . . . .	4
Critique of politics and (anti-)politics in anarchism . . . . .	5
Striving for Autonomy as a Libertarian-Socialist Wing . . . . .	7

*I wrote this text for the debate blog of the german Interventionistische Linke (IL) because - well - with it I am looking for the debate. In the specific case, I was also interested in the fact that there is definitely theoretical thinking on a higher level in anarchism. That's why I wrote the text the way I did. In another place it would be shorter and easier to summarize. In the function of an intellectual, I see it as my task to move at interfaces and to walk a tightrope. In this case, between people who see themselves as anarchists and those who consider themselves to be part of "left-wing movements". And of course all this is to be understood as a proposal for discussion...*

With the following contribution I would like to stimulate a critical debate about our understanding of politics, reflect on the relationship between anarchism and left movements, and point to my activities. Understanding politics from an anarchist perspective can help broaden the discussion about our strategies and practices. To do this, it is important to look at the ambivalent rejection of politics and the reference to it by anarchists, which is different from that of radical left currents. For many years I have seen myself as an anarchist and have participated in some events to which the IL had also mobilized. Among them were the protests against the fascist march in Dresden, COP15, Castor Schottern, Blockupy and the G20 summit in Hamburg 2017. Even though the focus of my activities has changed in the meantime, I still believe that fundamental change can only succeed through pressure on the streets, diverse direct actions and self-organized grassroots work.

## **Anarchists and Socialist Movements**

In so called „left movements“ groups and networks, people come together who can be located in the three main currents of socialism: social democracy, party communism and anarchism. Instead of fighting primarily over ideological positions, as in groups that come together according to their convictions, or over programs, positions and voters' favor in parties, the focus in groups of left movements is on joint action. Even if controversies are by no means absent, this creates the basis for the cooperation of people who are shaped by different currents. This is welcome if there is an understanding that comprehensive social transformation cannot succeed through the masses to be led, but that it does require the diverse many to join forces.

There are few people who see themselves as anarchists and are organized in the IL. More often, however, it happens that anarchist contexts participate in the actions of left movements and yet maintain a certain distance from it. And there are understandable reasons for this: First, anarchists are skeptical of addressing masses because they often seem lethargic rather than allowing spontaneity to emerge. Even actions that rely on a large number of people can therefore only function that good - and have an emancipatory effect as well - as those who participate in them are organized in reference groups and also organize themselves in everyday life. Secondly, anarchists criticize symbolic politics, which were partly served and promoted in actions of civil disobedience. Relying primarily on media effectiveness does not generate counter-power.

Third, there is a critique of the event character of mass protest. If this is made palatable primarily as a spectacular experience in order to mobilize people for it, it cannot be sustainable and profound. A fourth point concerns the sometimes non-transparent way in which action consensus is reached and communicated. This also points to hierarchies in the background, as they admittedly also exist in anarchist organizations. Fifth, "movement management" is considered problematic, in which professional strategists presume, for example, to determine certain forms

of expression in advance or to place groups involved in protests like chess pieces. Finally, sixthly, those involved in left-wing movements can also tend to appropriate actions from other groups or, if necessary, to distance themselves from them in a way that lacks solidarity.

These criticisms are not new. They are also not only put forward by declared anarchists. They are observable effects that need to be reflected upon according to one's own demands and to which there are various possible answers. The anarchist perspective on the left movements is important so that it can continue to develop.

## **A Movement-Anarchism?**

Anarchists organize themselves - at the present time and in the German-speaking context - not as one movement, but in different, more or less overlapping scenes. At the latest since the work of the anti-globalization movement, they are confronted with the phenomenon that numerous practices, styles, forms of organization and action, as well as some theoretical considerations in leftist movements originate from the anarchist tradition, while at the same time there are only a few explicitly anarchist groups. It is precisely the experiences that people make in radical struggles in hotspots that produce new insights and ways of acting, which are then often adapted and, in the worst case, appropriated by the ruling order. Beyond ideological positioning, anarchists are more skeptical about these processes than many leftist actors. They sometimes accuse them of remaining within the given political framework.

It is by no means self-evident that anarchists nevertheless participate in left movements. Some come together primarily in ideological groups, others focus entirely on grassroots unions, and some prefer autonomously acting affinity groups. Beyond this, however, the presence of a "movement anarchism" can likewise be detected, which is particularly evident in the radical ecology movement and queerfeminist contexts in contemporary terms. Historically, Errico Malatesta, Johann Most, Emma Goldman, and Christiaan Cornelissen, for example, can be described as movement-anarchists. As anarch@-communists they saw themselves as a libertarian-socialist wing within social movements, especially in the labor movement, the cooperative movement, anti-militarist, anti-clerical and feminist movements.

A self-conception as a libertarian-socialist wing within movements would be useful for those anarchists currently involved in socialist groups and protests. But it would also be good for the socialist movements as a whole. However, this also includes a perspective against and beyond parliamentary politics and thus goes beyond mere extra-parliamentary opposition. In this way, the libertarian-socialist wing within left movements also advocates a critical distance from Left Parties, which can also be validly justified beyond dogmatic reflexes of demarcation. As mentioned, movement-anarchism is not a reality today. To organize it would require strategic discussion processes within and outside left movements, which I believe are worthwhile.

## **Approaches for transformation**

The starting point for this are different understandings of transformation, which need to be discussed. A prerequisite for the emergence of anarchism as an independent socialist current was the rejection of political reform as an expression of social democracy on the one hand and

political revolution as the horizon of party communism on the other. Instead of the former, approaches were developed in which mutualist self-organization was relied upon to change society in a grassroots way. The rejection of the latter led to the advocacy of insurrection and everyday subversion. In addition, the transformational concept of autonomous protest emerged, focusing on radicalization and self-organization in social movements, and finally that of social revolution. Social revolution is not about the takeover of state power, but about the fundamental transformation of political structures into federations of decentralized autonomous communities. The socialization of private property and the means of production is to be carried out by the workers themselves and directly.

Moreover, social revolution is meant to overcome the different dimensions of the order of domination (e.g. gender and nature relations, culture and ethics) at the same time. And it happens processually, constructively developing new forms of organization and community and prefiguratively oriented towards concrete utopias. In movement anarchism, particular reference is made to the last two concepts. When Simon Sutterlütli advocates transformation as a "construction" that leads to "*Aufhebung*," he is referring (implicitly and unconceivedly) to thoughts from anarchist transformation strategies. In the notion of "germinal theory" („Keimformtheorie“) this is even borrowed verbatim from anarchism. Unfortunately, however, this is done in a truncated way, because comically it insists on reinventing the wheel with „commons approaches“ in an idealistic way, instead of consequently formulating a contribution to theoretically renew anarchism. To obscure the anarchist core of these theoretical strands does not advance the debate on contemporary, meaningful approaches to transformation.

In this context, thinking like that of John Holloway (2010) or Eric Olin Wright is more helpful for the socialist movements. Here, the latter attempts to combine transformation through rupture (party communism), through free spaces (anarchism), and through symbiosis (social democracy) to make a common socialist project conceivable (Wright 2017: 375-485). In doing so, Wright argues, genuine social transformation can only be made possible if all three approaches are brought together. With its emphasis on concrete utopias, the assumption that socialism will not grow out of capitalism, that social empowerment is needed, and that multiple strategies must work together for a fundamental transformation of society, the conclusion of his book in particular seems directly anarchistic (Wright 2017: 486-496), his conception of transformation is only partly so. And therein lies precisely the strength of a conception that thinks different approaches together. However, this presupposes that the adherents of the respective currents, wings or spectrums, get to know and further develop their own foundations, abilities and difficulties. Incidentally, this is also the prerequisite for disputes that are conducted in solidarity and constructively, rather than dogmatically and divisively. The latter, however, does not mean renouncing radical doubt where it is necessary...

## **Critique of politics and (anti-)politics in anarchism**

The distinctive feature of anarchism within socialist movements is its emphasis on autonomy, decentralization and self-organization of social movements, instead of being apron organizations of parties or even artificially created pseudo-movements (as for instance the conservative, „populist“ and anti-emancipatory wing of Sarah Wagenknecht). With anarchism, prefiguration is also made strong, that is, the concern to already embody with one's own forms of organization and

action the form of society that is to be aspired to and generalized. The own ethics and the social dimension among activists also gains an important significance: The own movement should have a tangible emancipating effect. In this way, the confrontation with the structures of domination is sought, instead of only using them provocatively to enter into negotiations with those in political power. And initiative is to be appropriated instead of merely rushing after the day-to-day business of the political agenda of overall social developments or their framing by government policy.

Anarchists conclude at this perspective through a specific critique of politics. In order to explain why anarchists take this position, the term "politics" must be defined. Firstly its use in everyday language is very diffuse. Furthermore, the definition of "politics" is highly controversial - and thus itself a political act: According to the way we understand "politics", we deal with it in different ways. This is worth thinking about more carefully, so that we can develop content and positions in a self-determined way. In conservative thinking, politics has above all the task of maintaining a "good" (i.e. stable) social order. Abbreviated state-socialist approaches see politics merely as the result of economic constellations. Liberal-democratic thinking considers the political sphere in a field of tension between state and society and assumes that various processes lead to the opening or closing of politics. This is opposed by the radical-democratic tradition, which contrasts solidified politics with "the political". The latter is the processual questioning of orders of domination by self-organized groups, for example in the plaza-occupation movements.

In contrast, for strategic reasons, I refer here to a certain anarchist understanding with which politics is always linked to governance ("governmental"). According to this definition, politics is always linked to conflict ("conflict-oriented"), but it is doubted that its main goal is the establishment of a "good order" (for all) ("negative-normative"). Finally, politics can also be understood as always being about often bloody and intriguing power struggles and the preservation of power between mostly extremely unequal actors ("ultra-realistic"). Of course, politics is not only about this. It is also about negotiation, sometimes it seems unavoidable, especially if we claim to change the form of society as a whole - and thus also the shape of what politics is in a particular order of rule. But if we accept this definition (and there are numerous people around the world and throughout history to whom politics appears this way), from an emancipatory point of view it can rightly be questioned whether doing politics is worthwhile. As I said, this is not about supposedly right or wrong terms, but about the worthwhile questioning and shifting of our perspective.

Anarchists, then, have a greater skepticism about policymaking than is present in other socialist currents, which, in this view, underestimate the extent to which statehood appropriates and monopolizes political action. Furthermore, activists in other currents of social movements often attribute their political action to the state (for example, by proposing very specific laws and deferring concerns that are considered unrealistic). For example, members of political parties tend to limit the autonomy of a social movement to serve their own interests. The same is true of NGOs, which sometimes take on a very statist function as a result of new governmental techniques ("neoliberal governmentality"). But even people who re-politicize themselves, as in Fridays for Future, often believe that "politics" should finally act in the face of clear evidence and therefore appeal to it. Left-wing radical groups, on the other hand, do not assume that they can influence government policy with their actions, but they still often remain oriented toward rudiments of the scheme of political revolution.

## Striving for Autonomy as a Libertarian-Socialist Wing

But anarchist thinking functions differently from stating a contradiction between "reform" and "revolution", which could be bridged by "radical realpolitik" - be it in the understanding of Rosa Luxemburg. As already indicated, on the other hand, the aim is to overcome this contradiction with the understanding of social revolution. In this way, the terrain of politics defined by the prevailing order is consciously left behind. Politics, however, does not have to be seen as "bad" or "evil" because of this. It is enough to keep in mind that we can act at least as powerfully in many other spheres if we want to fundamentally change society. These other spheres, one strives away from relations of domination and towards autonomy, can be found in many aspects which are familiar to us from leftist scenes and environments. They have their points of reference in the individual (the self-determination and self-development of all individuals), in the social (e.g. neighborhood assemblies), in "the" society (e.g. building counter-power from below), in the economy (autonomous unions) and the community (communes and alternative scenes). Furthermore, art, ethics and utopia are understood as antipoles to the political sphere.

However, this does not lead anarchists to an a-political or non-political attitude, but to a lived contradiction with the political field, which is constituted under conditions of the existing order of domination as a statist relationship of domination. Accordingly, the invocation of the so-called "civil society" and the reference to it must also be questioned, because it is - with Gramsci - the space upstream of the state. This by no means excludes working with various people who do not have any decidedly "leftist" convictions and backgrounds. More people than we think see through the "political illusion," that is, the idea that it makes sense to spend one's energy and time on activities in the enclosed political terrain. But that doesn't mean they can't aspire to fundamentally change society.

If the movement left were to align itself more closely with its (potential) libertarian-socialist wing, it would have to be more consistent about what it really wants to change and model where it wants to go. One starting point for this is not to fall into the "trap of politics" - as Emma Goldman called it - but to strengthen and communicate its own perspectives, approaches to action and groups. Examples of this are well-known projects like the autonomy efforts in Rojava and Chiapas, as well as the historical self-organization of workers, the autonomous movement of the 70s/80s or municipalist/communalist movements today. The aim is not, for example, to glorify these movements or to present them as better, but to work out the differences in the political understandings in order to discuss them further. As always, there are different positions on this and it is important to continue the disputes and debates it.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Jonathan Eibisch  
Socialist Movements, Anarchism and (Anti-)Politics  
A Plea for a Movement-Anarchism and (Anti)Politics

This post was first published on <https://blog.interventionistische-linke.org/> on January 2023 as a guest post. Its author blogs at [paradox-a.de](https://paradox-a.de). The article was translated with help of [deepl.com](https://www.deepl.com).

If someone wants to revise it linguistically, the original can be found here:  
<https://paradox-a.de/texte/bewegungslinke-anarchismus-und-anti-politik/>

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](https://theanarchistlibrary.org)**