

Considerations about the Anarchist Programme

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November 2006

During the last seventy years anarchism has seen itself reduced in almost all the world to a minimal expression, save notable exceptions which have still retained a certain weight, until the beginning of the decade of 1970 (Uruguay is the most notable case in South America), which had, with highs and lows, a certain continuity, as in the Spanish case. Very many factors contributed to its decline and it is not the case, in this article, to evaluate the factors which contributed to this. The truth is that, during this epoch, the majority of libertarian expressions, reduced to a minimal expression, saw themselves limited in their radius of action to propaganda. In such a way, large organisations of libertarian character were reduced to end converted into affinity groups or collectives, which, in one or another way, kept the flame alight by means of a publication or some other form of divulgence.

It was in the last two decades that there was a new awakening in the interest in anarchism and in which, again, the teachings of Bakunin and the lessons left by the old revolutionary syndicalists found a new echo in the popular movement. Anarchism, once again, found itself with the masses. The first indications of this libertarian rebirth showed themselves in the days of May 68 in France, and during the whole decade of 1990, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the so-called “real socialisms”, the field was again open to the anarchist movement, which, on one side, strongly opposed itself to the (old) “New Order”, and on the other, provided, principally to the youth, new forms of organisation, of struggle and of channeling their rebellion; forms which distanced themselves radically from the forms of classic Marxist-Leninism. The new popular movements of this decade (particularly since the emergence of the Zapatista movement in 1994) recaptured, in its discourse and its practice, many elements that marked a clear rupture with the left fading away with the wall in Berlin, while, at the same time, recapturing certain elements of the libertarian tradition. The practice of the people gave reason to the arguments of the old Bakunin.

In rhythm with these social transformations and these new resistances, anarchist groupings flourished all over the world, sometimes appearing in a publication, other times in a broader movement (as with Zapatismo) and sometimes with the definite intention of reconstructing the anarchist movement. Nevertheless, the problems that all of these groups faced were notable: the lack of organisational references was one of the most grave, since the only known references

were of historical character and could only be understood through history books or by relations with one or another militant of the old guard who survived the transformations of the second half of the twentieth century. That anarchism is organisation, as all the pamphlets say, nobody discussed, however, other questions arose. How to organise? Which aspects should a libertarian organisation have? How do you arrive at agreements without falling into the traditional models of the left groups? All of these questions surrounded various of us, who care to raise a libertarian alternative. Lacking references we found the answers in a very empirical way, in part adopting elements of that which we knew, in part adopting elements of some of the new popular movements, and in part imagining how the old anarchist organisations would have arrived at agreements and, in large part, improvising.

Thus we were growing, attracting new blood to the libertarian cause. But, the limitations began to appear in a clear way, correspondingly as things began to move. It is remarkable that the majority of organisations continued reproducing the model of propaganda groups. These propaganda groups had an important job when anarchism was a minority movement, and it is thanks to them that libertarian ideas survived until today. But given the demands of the present and in the face of a movement that had already grown too much to still conform to the task of propaganda, this logic of organisation showed itself to be insufficient.

Many of us had become ever more conscious of the necessity to make a qualitative shift from propaganda groups to organisations of a political-revolutionary character. How to make this shift? For a long time, we believed that we were going to find an answer to this question in certain formalities: the organisation as mere structure, the number of militants or the quantity of areas in which our militants were inserted. In reality, none of this was fundamental and, besides this, we can aspire to be bigger or smaller propaganda groups, with or without a national secretary, or with areas of propaganda more or less diversified. However, in the end, we continued being propaganda groups, with the limitation that this represents for the development of the movement.

It was necessary, then, to go beyond the formalities: the shift from propaganda groups to solid revolutionary political organisation requires a deep political transformation, which allows a growth in political terms and which allows the transformation of the libertarian movement into a mass movement. This transformation is the translation of libertarian thought and practice into a concrete revolutionary programme of action. And it is this actual phase in which many libertarian movements at the global level find themselves today, dealing with defining a libertarian project for the present and the immediate future.

Our Position in the Anarchist Tradition and the Need for a Political Shift

To address the question of the revolutionary programme, which we will do with more profundity in this article, it is necessary to start with very basic political precepts, as though all expressions of the libertarian movement have to make this jump to the programmatic plane, this is particularly sensitive for the anarchist communist tradition of which we are part. The exact location that we occupy in the anarchist tradition is something that we should remember at all time. To be part of the anarchist communist tradition (which develops from the Platform) is not something we should take lightly and neither is it something that we should transform into a mere article of faith. This option is not simply a decision of whim, nor was it chosen by excessive ideological zeal. This option expresses, sensibly, the will to construct a certain type of organisation, so as to depend on a certain type of tool in order to transform our exploitative and oppressive reality into a free and just society. With this purpose in mind, we consider that the

revolutionary guide and the organisational approach put forward in the Platform possess central elements of great value. Without being a recipe to follow blindly, its fundamental elements are concrete and useful, judging by the experience that we have built internationally, the study of revolutionary movements that preceded us and the causes of their failure.

The essence of the Platform is how to build an organisation that unites like-minded anarchists based on concrete proposals and tactics – that is, a “political organisation” as opposed to what is a purely ideological group. In this tradition, it is perfectly fair that we ask ourselves how many of our organisations, leaving aside any pretensions, have actually managed to reach the level of development of a political organisation. At present, the majority of these groupings are only propaganda groups. The principle difference between a political organisation and a propaganda group is not its number of militants nor its level of militancy, nor even the political insertion of its members. The principle difference is the simple answer to the question: what can we offer the people? While propaganda groups can not offer more than a political and ideological vision and, in the best cases, a few slogans, the revolutionary political organisation can offer a course of action; a programme; a tactical line; a strategy; short-, medium- and long-term objectives.

Departing from this point of view, we must overcome the basic limitation of orthodox anarcho-syndicalism in relation to the anarchist organisation, a limitation which the followers of the Platform combated, but which, today, we often cannot escape. This limitation is the belief that the anarchist group is a purely ideological group, outside of the small daily struggles, and immaculate in relation to the struggle for reforms. Reforms, in its opinion, are the task of trade unions, political and social fronts or social organisations.

Departing from our conception, we completely reject this way of understanding the role of the anarchist groupings, and it is this which makes us, before anything, anarchist communists. What this means is to defend the need for anarchists that have affinity in political terms to unite, but also that they organise as such to confront everyday struggles; that they develop their social proposals, not only in view of the unlikely eventuality of a revolution that nobody knows when it will be, but for the present. After all, revolutions do not occur magically, but they are propelled. If we do not begin to transform the present, we will never arrive at satisfactory conclusions in the future. In theory everyone is in agreement with this, but what happens in practice?

Making Anarchism Relevant to Everyone

The question, then, is put in front of us, without the possibility of evading it: can we be sincerely satisfied with propaganda? Propaganda, we have already admitted, was necessary to build a movement like we have today. But it cannot continue being the exclusive focus of our efforts today – propaganda cannot determine the needs of the organisation; it is the needs of the organisation that have to determine the propaganda. Can we be satisfied, in all honesty, going from struggle to struggle divulging our principles? It is time to responsibly assume the importance that our movement has and we should begin to behave in accordance with this circumstance.

Nowadays, it is simply not sufficient to make declarations about the society that we want in the next 500 years or after the revolution. Between the struggles that we are waging today and the ideal society of the future that we aspire to there is an enormous abyss. We are utopians in the worst sense of the word; or reformists, in the extent to which the struggle for reforms is not bound (despite our wishes) to a revolutionary strategy. Between our utopianism and our reformism is where we must find the path to revolutionary politics, which unifies our participation in the struggles for reforms and changes in the present, with those grand aspirations that inspire us.

It is time to think what kind of society, of country, we want in the next, let's say, five years, or in any concrete space of time. This is the big question that we should ask at the moment; the answer will be of great benefit to our movement and to make our anarchism relevant to people today. Not in theory, but in practice. The libertarian economist Michael Albert, at a talk in Dublin, made an accurate comment affirming that the vast majority of people are in agreement with us in our critique of the vices of capitalism. Many, indeed, would be in agreement with what is sought in an anarchist society, when this is explained properly. But while we do not form a practical alternative, with very concrete and feasible proposals for the present, that demonstrate that the libertarian project is viable, there are not many opportunities for our movement to increase its circle of influence.

What does it Help to Militate in an Anarchist Organisation?

So, we have to ask ourselves what impedes us from growing as an organisation. Sometimes people close to our groups give as a reason for not joining in the militancy of our organic structures, the fact of not seeing a motive to be in an anarchist organisation if they are able to participate in social organisations and do the same – or more – in them. Some others say that the anarchists, as with a large part of the left, spend all the time chasing their own tail. Without a programme and strategy, it is easy for us to be taken adrift by events, and at the end of a struggle turn the page and start another new circle. We need to no longer go around in circles and start to accumulate seriously in our struggles, for a concrete project which has continuity in time.

Frequently we see excellent, close comrades that militate with us in spaces of struggle or popular organisations. Why do these comrades have to be anarchist militants? Why participate in a group that does not give them more than perspectives of the struggle in spaces in which, in every way, they are already participating? What does a comrade gain, in political terms, by joining a libertarian organisation? An anarchist organisation has to be more than a sum of spaces or fronts of struggle if it wants to have any meaning.

The main reason for a libertarian political organisation is the capacity to develop a political line that gives direction to collective action, to give orientation to a greater range than a determined social sector (e.g. students, workers, etc.) or to people in a given locality. The organisation is a space of convergence in which it accumulates for a project of society. To be members of an anarchist communist organisation should represent a qualitative difference for our political activities in terms not just of organisational presence, but also of political direction. This direction constitutes itself as the basis of a line of concrete and explicit intervention in social conflicts.

Pure faith in anarchism, although necessary, is not enough: it is necessary to develop a concrete political project. You cannot, during each and every struggle, return the debate to zero, reinventing the wheel; it is necessary to have clear politics, fruit of an accumulation of experiences, with an equally clear line of action, that facilitates the evaluation and intervention in the social processes as they develop, possessing the capacity to confront history.

This line of action is clearly of paramount importance, since the real problem is not whether we win or lose in a specific struggle, but what we do for the continuity of the struggle, regardless of whether we win or lose. The problem is how this or that struggle may be useful in the process of accumulation of experiences, of gaining confidence and increasing the people's power that can be utilised in future struggles and in the elaboration of a social project.

The ability to take this course of action and a programme born of this accumulated experience, that unifies our proposals in order to address the present with our long-term objectives, is what makes the difference in a revolutionary political organisation. No one has motive to join an

anarchist organisation to, for example, do trade unionism. For this it is enough to join a union. Similarly, ideas about the future can be very interesting, but they are insufficient for most people as an argument to join a political initiative. A practical vision of the possibility of transformation of society as a whole in the medium term is necessary. If I am a maltreated spouse, if I am an immigrant, if I am a worker but am unemployed, if I detest my job and all the jobs I can get, what difference does it make to my life to be an anarchist? This is the question that should lead us to understand our anarchism as a living force in society and as a project of transformation, or as a revolutionary project.

Why a Revolutionary Programme?

We have already spoken a lot about the necessity of a strategic vision, of concretising our anarchism, of the revolutionary programme. But what exactly do we want to say with all of this? We have to specify well what we want to say in order not to be confused, we as anarchist-communists, with what some dogmatic currents understand by revolutionary programme; their understanding of a programme is not more than a dead weight, written over five decades ago with nothing modified (as if the world has not undergone changes since then). We also cannot confuse the programme with a panacea that will magically overcome all the mistakes of our political practice.

A revolutionary programme is, in a few words, a set of very precise and concrete proposals to advance towards profound social transformations. It is not revolutionary theory, but the application of this theory in order to comprehend and change a concrete society. It departs from an analysis of the current society, studies the current conditions of the terrain for the class struggle, identifies the most urgent problems and the conditions to develop a movement; studies potential allies and enemies; and proposes a series of changes, as well as a way to reach them by means of struggle. In all of these moments of elaboration of the programme, theory serves as a guide. Theory, not understood as dogma, but as a tool to better comprehend the world.

This programme guides us in action and delivers us clear proposals with which we can convert anarchism from a “beautiful idea that is impractical” to a clear alternative for the present of oppression and exploitation. Revolutionary programmes do not need to be considered as “Moses’ tablets”, but must be reviewed, updated or modified constantly. The programme must maintain, at all times, its relevance, its actuality, and above all, it must have a concrete link through a collective and defined practice.

Certainly, this programmatic approach requires going from slogans to proposals; and requires going from criticism of reality to critical study of reality. If anarchism wants to reach the majority as a political movement we cannot content ourselves with easy formulas nor with the absence of proposals that reigns in our circles. In an enlightening article, the libertarian thinker Camilo Berneri noted in this sense the following:

“The enemy is this: it is the State. But the State is not simply a political organism, an instrument for the preservation of social inequalities; it is also an administrative organism. As an administrative structure, the State cannot be abolished. That is, it is possible to disassemble and reassemble it, but not negate it, because this paralyzes the nation’s rhythm of life, which pulsates in the railway arteries, in the telephonic veins, etc.

Federalism! It’s a word. It is a formula without positive content. What do the teachers offer us? The premise of federalism: the anti-statal conception, a political conception and not technical reasons, fear of centralisation and not projects of decentralisation.

Here, on the contrary, is a study theme: the State in its administrative functioning. Here is a propaganda theme: the systematic critique of the State as centralised administrative organ and, therefore, incompetent and irresponsible. Every day the daily news offers us subjects for this critique: millions wasted in poor speculation, in bureaucratic delays; powder magazines blown to pieces because of the negligence of the “competent” offices; plundering on a small and large scale, etc. A systematic campaign of this type could attract to us the attention of many not moved at all by reading God and the State.

Where to find people who can regularly feed this campaign? These people exist. It is necessary that they give signs of life. A mobilisation is necessary! Professionals, employees, teachers, students, workers, all live in contact with the State or at least with its large enterprises. Almost everyone can see the damage of mal-administration: the waste of the incompetents, or theft of the lazy, the obstacles of the Mastodonic bodies.

[...] *We have to return to federalism! Not to throw on the couch the words of the teachers, but to create a renovated and strengthened federalism by the efforts of all those good, of all those capacitated.”*

(Pagine Liberaire, Milan, 20th November 1922)

In his words the need to overcome discursive, self-indulgent anarchism is clear, and to begin to think with all seriousness about our social problems in all their complexity, without simplifications or theoretic a-priority. This necessity, transversal to all expressions of the libertarian movement, explains why it is necessary to make the shift to the establishment of revolutionary programmes. However, programmatic thought does not serve only as a way to confront with constructive proposals the social problems and to expand the anarchist circle, but, besides this, it allows us to put an end to two burdens characteristics of the libertarian movement: first, to the politics of being “satellites” around the rest of the left, which turns us into mere opponents or followers of other alternatives, without a proposal of our own and without being, therefore, an alternative in our own right. On the other hand, it also helps us to overcome sectarian divisions, since often sectarianism and the incapacity to correctly assume a politics of alliances is due to the lack of clarity of the libertarians in all of their immediate objectives. The development of concrete programmes, in conclusion, strengthens our presence in the popular struggles, giving vigor of its own to our flag.

Where to Start Discussion of the Programme?

We return, then, to repeat the question: what do I gain from joining a libertarian organisation? We should not answer this question in the way of assistance. There are not works of charity that we can or would want to do. Certainly, joining a libertarian group will not permit your career ascension and there is, much less, the remote possibility of becoming a professional politician. The answer should emerge from how we can transform and mobilise society in its entirety. While the right's and the center's aim, in order to attract a support base, at immediate but inconsistent benefit (the practice of clientelism), our position is that in order to have improvements, it is necessary to struggle. For this reason, the immediate benefits are difficult (with the exception of the real satisfaction of mutual aid between comrades, of solidarity and of the feeling of gaining power that comes together with struggle), but the improvements that we conquer will definitely be more consistent.

So, we are fighting organisations. But if we are fighting organisations, then strategy and tactics must be applied. We need to know well our long term objectives and how to advance our positions, the end being to weaken our class enemy, thereby strengthening our support base

(in the working class) and taking concrete tactical steps which bring us closer to a position of breaking with the (prevailing) old order.

To start a battle it is necessary to know, exactly and with precision, the nature and the characteristics of the field of battle. We must develop political, social and economic analyses, both on the national and international levels. We need to describe and identify the principle tendencies of the global development of capitalism. This analysis should be updated regularly.

Knowing the terrain on which one steps, the following task is to identify potential allies; not on the theoretical level (something that should already be defined), but in very concrete terms. How is the working class structured today? What type of internal contradictions does it present? Where is the potential for struggle? What conflicts does it present? Who are the other actors in struggle?

Once we know with whom we can count, we need to know how to attract them. We need to begin, then, to discuss the most urgent subjects of the moment: health, housing, education, natural resources, workers' relations, etc... Not in an abstract manner, but concretely, in our country, today or in the immediate future. These most urgent needs require a thorough overview in order to give coherent answers to particular problems, in relation to which we should have something more to offer than slogans. We have to talk about transport, distribution, grassroots democratic structures, exchange, etc. In this way, we need to translate anarchism from an "ideology" into a system of social proposals, of alternatives of struggle.

With this approach, we abandon this ancient vision of revolution as if it were a kind of apocalyptic moment in which we can, then and only then, magically establish our constructive programme. History teaches us that revolutions are the result of a prolonged process in time; they don't happen from night to day, since the critical rupture of the classes in conflict can occur after a relatively large period of concessions, conquests, tensions and disputes over sensitive social demands. Something that may seem like an irrelevant reform today can become the spark that lights the revolutionary fire. The duty of revolutionaries is to promote our programme through resistance and construction, from the present, and not to wait for that distant day of revolution, on a distant dawn. By working this way we are, in reality, laying the practical basis of the society in which we want to live.

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November 2006

Retrieved on 14th October 2021 from www.anarkismo.net

An article which discusses the anarchist programme from a revolutionary anarchist perspective.

In it, the author analyses the need to make a qualitative shift from an anarchism which is restricted to propaganda circles, to an anarchism with the possibility of social transformation, putting forward a few basic considerations for the necessity of the development of revolutionary programmes in order to facilitate this shift. Translation by Jonathan (ZACF)

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