

Anarchism and the Newest Social Movements

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Abstract

Something new has been taking place around the world. Societies are in movement as never before—not with such tremendous numbers, consistent horizontal forms, uses of direct action over demands, in vastly disparate geographies and with such overarching global consistency. This chapter will delve into the specifics of the newer anti-capitalist movements, as well as ground them in many historical movements, both recent and with a longer view, that have similar forms and visions, such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, the Global Justice Movement and the Argentine assembly movements post-2001. In particular, the question of the similarities with an anarchist approach and vision will be discussed in relation to the newer movement forms and will ask the question of the newness of these forms.

There is not much of a global anarchist movement today. At the same time, since the 1990s, many popular movements around the world have been animated by something that I am going to call an anarchist spirit—a way of organising and relating that opposes hierarchy and embraces direct democracy. These forms have many things in common with ideas developed by people like Emma Goldman, Murray Bookchin and the libertarian left in Spain during the 1930s. However, being animated by, and having the spirit of, anarchism is not the same as being ideologically anarchist. Many contemporary movements are touched by this spirit, sometimes without even knowing the similar roots that their forms of organising share with those of historical anarchists, and most do not identify with the tradition of anarchism, or if they do, for many it is for brief moments, not as an overarching political guide to organising.

Anarchism is not a unified ideology or theory, but it does emphasise a few core beliefs: opposition to both capitalism and the state, emphasis on face-to-face relationships and prefigurative ways of organising society. Some anarchists look to the working class as the main agent of change; for others, it is ecology, and still others view feminism as the starting point for transforming society. All anarchists oppose institutional forms of hierarchy and the idea of power as something to wield over others. That does not, however, mean that anarchists oppose organisation, structure, rules, accountability or forms of governance.

Contemporary movements, meaning those that are flourishing at the writing of this chapter, such as the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH), the housing defence movement in Spain; the autonomous Social Solidarity Clinics in Greece; many if not most of the land defence movements in Latin America; and the recuperated workplaces in Southern Europe and the post-2016 election solidarity groups in the US, have emerged from communities and neighbourhoods with their gaze at the horizon, not the state. They are not mobilised or organised by a union, specific group or political party. They organise horizontally, generally using forms of direct democracy. They employ direct action as the first step instead of petitioning, lobbying or putting forward demands to institutions of power. Often, they try and embody the future they wish to see in their day-to-day relationships, rejecting hierarchy and grounding their organising in affect and trust. Most are majority women, and led, in the day-to-day organising, by women.

This chapter discusses an increasingly expansive and diverse phenomenon in social movement organising and societies in movement, and while perhaps not the majority experience per se, they represent the experiences of millions of people over the past two decades. These are

movements grounded in forms of organisation that are not ‘new’ in and of themselves, but are new in the sheer numbers and diversity of people participating in organising in these ways. These movements tend towards a more horizontal gaze, striving for new social relationships of participation and care, with goals of self-organisation, and with a focus on these goals and less on demands on institutions of power. Many have called the movements anarchist—as a celebration or a curse. This chapter describes the phenomenon, using a few specific examples, and relates this phenomenon to anarchist concepts, to see if there is a way to think about both without one dominating the other.

In this chapter I focus predominantly on the common forms of organisation in the post-2001 crisis in Argentina and the Movements of the Squares, looking at places of commonality with anarchist practices and ideas. In particular, *horizontalidad*, *autogestion*, defined as self-organisation with direct horizontal forms, perspectives on the state and institutional power and prefiguration.

While the focus of this chapter is Argentina and the Movements of the Squares, any discussion of the emergence of contemporary horizontal forms of organising, on a mass level, not looking to the state for solutions, must begin with the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico. Emerging publicly in 1994, declaring a resounding ‘*Ya Basta!*’ (Enough is Enough!) and quickly reorganising themselves in response to their reception, they began to create dozens of autonomous communities, rather than place demands on the state or organise for state power. And next, in Argentina, in 2001 the popular rebellion sang ‘*Que Se Vayan Todos! Que No Quede Ni Uno Solo!*’ (Everyone Must Go! Not Even One Should Remain!). As with the Zapatistas, the movements focused on creating horizontal assemblies, not asking power to change things, but creating that alternative in the present with their new social relationships: taking over and running workplaces by the hundreds without bosses; retaking land; creating new collectives and cooperatives, from media to art; redefining work and breaking from past hierarchical ways of relating—forming a new dignity.

Then, in 2011, the world witnessed the beginning of a similar form of massive rejection, with declarations of ‘You Don’t Represent Us!’ and ‘Enough!’ and in that space of the ‘no’, as with the Zapatista ‘*Ya Basta!*’ and Argentinian ‘They All Must Go!’, alternatives have been manifested—often prefiguring a desired future. In various towns, villages and cities, in countries across the globe, people created (and some continue to create) new social relationships and ways of being. In some places this continues to take the form of directly democratic neighbourhood assemblies, in others the movements take on alternative forms of production, agriculture, defence of the land, housing, health care, child care and education.

The Break in Argentina: *Que Se Vayan Todos!*

Millions of people singing ‘que se vayan todos, que no quedan, ni uno solo’ (they all must go, not even one should remain), public art/graffiti reading: *Ni Dios, Ni Patria* (neither god nor homeland), *La Solución Autogestion*, *Nuestro Suenos no Caben en Sus Urnas* (Our Dreams Do Not Fit in Your Ballot Boxes), *La Verdadera Democracia Esta En Las Calles* (True Democracy is in the Streets), *Nunca Mas, No Te Metas* (Never Again, Don’t Get Involved) and *Ocupar, Resistir, Producir* (Occupy, Resist, Produce). Hundreds of thousands of middle class, and recently declassed urban dwellers organising in neighbourhood assemblies, rejecting hierarchy and instead using forms of direct democracy and *horizontalidad*, hundreds of work places, from clinics and supermarkets, to

print shops and daily papers being taken over and run by workers, again, using forms of direct democracy and *horizontalidad*. Indigenous communities retaking their land and doing so with the support and solidarity of people in other movements. Unemployed workers not only shutting down roads and bridges to demand unemployment subsidies (which were won), but *autogestionando* in their neighbourhoods, creating communal bakeries and kitchens, popular education and schools, alternative medicine, sometimes including optometry and acupuncture, taking over land to create organic gardens to try and feed the community, building housing on the occupied land, creating fish hatcheries and raising other livestock for protein. In some cases creating things ranging from beauty parlours and cinemas to massage workshops. And then, many of these movements, relating to one another as a movement of movements. Movements that were not trying to take state power, but creating—prefiguring—the alternatives they desired to see in their day-to-day relationships.

This is just a glimpse of the inspiring creation that took place, and in some areas continues to take place, in Argentina particularly since 19 and 20 December 2001, when a total economic collapse precipitated millions of people taking to the streets, *cacerolando*,¹ and within two weeks expelling five consecutive governments, while simultaneously creating horizontal assemblies to try and meet their needs.

From Kefaya! To Democracia Real Ya!

Between 2011 and 2012, millions of people gathered in plazas and squares declaring ‘*No Nos Representan!*’ (They Don’t Represent Us!) in Spain, ‘*Ya Basta!*’ (in reference to the Zapatistas) in Greece, ‘*vy nas dazhe ne predstavlyayete!*’ (You can’t represent us—and you cannot even imagine us!) in Russia and ‘*Kefaya!*’ (Enough!) in Egypt.

Each movement was sparked at different times by different specific causes, but with powerful similarities in forms of organisation, and under the same general rubric: no to representation, and yes to horizontal social relationships. Each of the movements used space similarly to create these new relationships, first in the occupation and recuperation of large parks and plazas, and then to the neighbourhoods and smaller towns. None are traditional social movements that have ‘claims’ and ‘demands’ that once met will placate the movement. These are movements about reclaiming relationships, reclaiming space and reinventing ways of being.

People came together in the ‘no’, the refusal, and looking to one another began to talk about alternatives. Turning their backs on the state and institutions that brought them to this moment, they turned to one another, forming assemblies and over time, networks and groups for self-organisation. The media were incredulous, constantly asking, what do they want? The traditional left was equally so and was angry when the movements did not accept their leadership.

A number of years have passed since the plaza occupations, yet the reverberations continue. As the Spanish 15-M movement participants reflect, the movement was *una clima*, a sensation. This echoes societies in movement in Latin America over the past decade, where, for example, people in Argentina when referring to their continued use of *horizontalidad* and autonomy speak of being children of the popular rebellion of 2001.

The experiences in Argentina and the Movements of the Squares are part of many other experiences over the past two decades in particular, where a rupture takes place, and within that

¹ Cacerolas are the phenomenon of banging on pots and pans, usually as a form of protest.

space people look to one another, begin to see themselves and one another differently, and create alternatives to the forms of relating bequeathed to us. Instead people created horizontal relationships, attempting to facilitate the development of new subjectivities, and found ways to take care of one another, using what anarchists might call mutual aid, grounding all of it in a form of autonomy, whether using that language explicitly, as the Argentines did, or implicitly as with the Movements of the Squares. The overarching language used for this phenomenon is often prefiguration. Over the past twenty years, the world has been witnessing an upsurge in prefigurative movements, movements that create the future in the present. These new movements are not creating party platforms or programmes. They do not look to one leader, but make space for all to be leaders. They place more importance on asking the right questions than on providing the correct answers. They resolutely reject dogma and hierarchy in favour of direct democracy and consensus.

In Argentina the Rebellion Began with a Sound...and a Song

On the night of the 19th, while the news was on television and the middle class was at home watching, seeing people from the most humble sectors crying, women crying in front of supermarkets, begging for or taking food, and the State of Siege was declared, then and there began the sound of the *cacerola* (the banging of pots and pans). In one window, and then another window, in one house and then another house, and soon, there was the noise of the *cacerola*.

The first person began to bang a pot and saw her neighbour across the street banging a pot, and the one downstairs too, and soon there were four, five, fifteen, twenty, and people moved to their doorways and saw other people banging pots in their doorways and saw on television that this was happening in another neighbourhood, and another neighborhood... and hundreds of people gathered banging pots until at a certain moment the people banging pots began to walk....

That's how it was. The movement of the 19th and 20th began with a sound—the sound of someone banging on a pot. That sound grew, and then bodies began to move from their houses to the corner, and then to the center of the city, and finally to the Plaza de Mayo. Bodies moved and pots banged, and finally that new phrase was spoken—not speeches, not explanations, not political party placards. There were housewives, young people—everyone was there—and they said with a common voice ‘que se vayan todos!’ (they all must go!).²

This description by Pablo of the neighbourhood assembly of Colegiales could have been described by any number of thousands of people throughout Argentina, who sang, chanted and created everything anew. Out of the popular rebellion, hundreds of neighbourhood assemblies emerged, workplaces were taken over and run by workers without bosses or hierarchy, and unemployed workers' movements grew by the thousands, taking over land and creating projects to

² Pablo, quoted in Marina Sitrin, *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006), 22.

aid survival in these difficult times. People not only said no, but were creating their many yeses, all at the same time.³

The idea of social creation without hierarchy, and the rejection of centralised power or political parties is something that is a key part of the anarchist tradition. Noam Chomsky, who sometimes refers to himself as an anarchist fellow traveller, explained the concept of the rejection of centralised authority in an interview:

I think it only makes sense to seek out and identify structures of authority, hierarchy, and domination in every aspect of life, and to challenge them; unless a justification for them can be given, they are illegitimate, and should be dismantled, to increase the scope of human freedom. That includes political power, ownership and management, relations among men and women, parents and children, our control over the fate of future generations (the basic moral imperative behind the environmental movement, in my view), and much else. Naturally this means a challenge to the huge institutions of coercion and control: the state, the unaccountable private tyrannies that control most of the domestic and international economy, and so on. But not only these. That is what I have always understood to be the essence of anarchism: the conviction that the burden of proof has to be placed on authority, and that it should be dismantled if that burden cannot be met.⁴

The *Que se vayan todos* was joined by social creation; creation that was horizontal. In the years I spent in Argentina after the rebellion, whenever I would ask someone what does it mean when you say you are horizontal, people would say, ‘well we are not this’, and show a vertical line with their hands, moving them back and forth as an indication of the rejection of hierarchy. Emilio, 17 at the time of our first conversation in 2002, explained this phenomenon:

Yes, the politics of reaction were first. First was the shout/scream. First was ‘*Que se vayan todos*’ (they all must go). First was the shout, a reaction to an unsustainable situation, and then the creation—almost at the same time. That’s to say, and it’s almost obvious, to break with something first you have to say ‘no’ to it, and from there start building something new. That’s how we begin to construct differently. *Horizontalidad* starts there. I believe that *horizontalidad*, like autonomy and *autogestion*, are momentary constructions and they are in themselves opening space for something more in Argentina. Today we are horizontal, first because we broke with representatives, with the old, with concepts of delegation. But I don’t believe that if things continue the way they are that the objective will be *horizontalidad* in itself, but it is, rather, a process that constructs and brings us to something more. It is dynamic.⁵

In Seán Sheehan’s book *Anarchism*, he says almost exactly what Emilio and so many others say in describing *horizontalidad*, though he is describing anarchism. He writes:

³ The Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, are credited with the phrase, one no and many yeses, which was to become popular during the late 1990s Global Justice Movement.

⁴ Noam Chomsky on ‘Anarchism, Marxism and Hope for the Future’. First published in *Red & Black Revolution* (No 2) 1996 (<http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/interviews/9505-anarchism.html>) (Accessed 29 September 2017).

⁵ Emilio quoted in Sitrin, *Horizontalism*, 39.

Anarchism as a process, a means of existing, happens when people collaborate with others out of a felt need for justice, on a voluntary basis, and without degrees of rank or hierarchy. Such moments are often personal or small group affairs but they can be public and they can point the way forward for libertarian socialism⁶

The influence of the post-2001 autonomous movements in Argentina on those around the globe striving for horizontal self-organisation is not measurable—at the same time, the knowledge of the massive directly democratic assemblies, recuperation of workplaces and taking over of land by the unemployed is known and has spread into the imagination of people organising all over the globe. While not trying to directly imitate what people have heard took place, the experience in Argentina has opened people’s imaginations as to what could be possible.

Horizontalidad

Horizontalidad is a word that came to embody the new social arrangements and principles of organisation of the post-2001 movements in Argentina. As its name suggests, it implies a flat plane upon which to communicate. It entails the use of direct democracy and involves, or at least intentionally strives towards, non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian creation rather than reaction. It is a break with vertical ways of organising and relating. *Horizontalidad* is a living word, reflecting an ever-changing experience. Months after the popular rebellion, many movement participants began to speak of their relationships as horizontal as a way of describing the new forms of decision-making. Years after the rebellion, those continuing to build new movements speak of *horizontalidad* as a goal as well as a tool.

Our relationships are still deeply affected by capitalism and hierarchy, and thus by the sort of power dynamics it promotes, especially how we relate to one another in terms of economic resources, gender, race, access to information and experience. As a result, until these fundamental social dynamics are overcome, the goal of *horizontalidad* cannot be achieved. Time has taught that, in the face of this, simply desiring a relationship does not make it so. But the process of *horizontalidad* is a tool for the achievement of this goal. Thus *horizontalidad* is desired, and is a goal, but it is also the means, a tool, to help achieve this end.

Similar to what was witnessed with millions of people assembling in plazas and parks around the world—from Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Syntagma Square in Athens and Zuccotti Park in New York—in Argentina hundreds of thousands of people went into the streets, without political parties or unions leading them, and formed assemblies, on street corners, in workplaces and in rural and post-industrial spaces, transforming them into laboratories of new social relationships. *Horizontalidad* became one of the main ways people described what they were doing.

As Ayelen, a participant in the 15-M in Madrid and child of South American exiles, discussed:

We are reflecting all the time about how to improve our techniques, because an assembly in which everyone has the right to talk doesn’t guarantee that everybody will feel free to talk. For example, affirmation is very influential, so it is the responsibility of the collective to give confidence to everyone, so that they feel encouraged to talk. It is important to notice how the collective reacts, and that has a direct influence on

⁶ Seán Seehan, *Anarchism* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 158.

building true freedom of expression, freedom to speak. There are also group dynamics where implicit leaderships are generated. It's OK if the person that knows most about certain things can talk and say what they have to say, but it's also necessary that the rest can also speak too, in order to break the delegation of power that generates vertical structures. When we practice the horizontal power structure, we are all using our power, but internally there are still mechanisms of delegation—the idea that other people must know more than us, or that we are afraid of making some mistake, and that means I'm uncertain to talk about certain things. I'm in love with horizontality, but am also thinking about goals for improving it. What we saw in horizontality was that, if assembly meetings are fifteen hours long, one gets exhausted, decisions end up being taken by fatigue, and are taken by the ones that resisted until the end, and it becomes vertical again.⁷

This horizontal relationship is at the heart of the creation of prefigurative spaces, particularly seen in the plazas and the neighbourhoods of the Movements of the Squares. As Ernest from the PAH and 15-M in Barcelona, Spain, described of the early days of Plaça de Catalunya:

It was like—the way you can imagine another possible world—everyone discussing issues that the media and politicians never talk about—it was awesome. If you took a walk around, maybe even at midnight, you would say: 'these people are crazy'. There were groups of 5 or 6 people who didn't know each other, talking about the energy crisis, nuclear treaties, or discussing labor issues. People who had never met before were there, having discussions, more and more people adding themselves to the discussions, something like mini-forums. It came out of a need to express, to communicate, and to imagine other worlds that never existed in the reality before 15-M.⁸

The Movements of the Squares, not only related in horizontal ways, focusing on the participation of all, but used the specific language of democracy in relation to what they were and are creating, rejecting outright the concept of representation and representative democracy. One can infer this from the Argentine autonomous movements, but, for example, the Spaniards took this to the point where their organising groups before 2011 used the frame of 'Real Democracy!'. As Ana explains:

This idea of 'Real Democracy Now!' and that of 'You Don't Represent Us' is the foundation of the 15-M movement. This is the most common feeling. It is authentic discomfort because decisions are made over which we have no control at all; and how can we begin to win that control over our own lives through something that we call democracy?⁹

Movement participants are clear in their rejection of representation, but the specific forms of democracy that they put forward are open.

⁷ Ayelen quoted in Marina Sitrin & Dario Azzellini, *They Can't Represent Us!: Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy* (New York: Verso Books, 2014), 135–136.

⁸ Ernest quoted in Sitrin & Azzellini, *They Can't Represent Us!*, 144–145.

⁹ Ana quoted in Sitrin & Azzellini, *They Can't Represent Us!*, 131.

Horizontal Self-Organisation

Continuing, and trying to expand on a more effective practice of horizontal social relationships, many of the Movements of the Squares intentionally shifted locations of the points of organising from central plazas and parks to neighbourhoods, workplaces and schools. Spain and Greece were the most explicit in the articulation of this shift, with the assembly in Madrid deciding to dissolve itself after a twenty-four-hour assembly, so as to deepen the experience of the movements in locations where people lived and worked. The movements in the US, Canada and other sites had similar conversations, and while they did not have the time to make the decision to move to the neighbourhoods in mass assemblies due to violent police evictions of the plazas, the conversation continued in various ways and in various more decentralised locations.

The pre-existing movement that grew most as a consequence of the 15-M in Spain is the movement against foreclosures, the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH). It is organised in chapters all over the country and coordinates concrete resistance to prevent foreclosures, a thread concerning hundreds of thousands of people since the crisis started in 2008. Since 2013, the PAH, together with neighbourhood groups, has taken over empty homes and entire buildings to house hundreds of homeless families. This is all done through the assemblies of each local group. The PAH has stopped at least 2045 evictions and rehoused 2500 people. There are now over 251 PAH nodes across Spain.¹⁰ Ernest, one of the participants in the PAH before the 15-M, explained the anti-foreclosure work:

The *Plataforma* is a pre-15-M movement, but it was given impetus by the 15-M. Before the 15-M there was an assembly of the Barcelona *Plataforma* and another in Terraza, and after the 15-M in just a short period of time there were 44 *Plataformas*, plus other neighborhood assemblies, that have the same action guidelines as protecting families from evictions, they give them some kind of counseling or they bring them to the *Plataforma*, but above all when there are announcements of foreclosures like this next Monday in their neighborhood, they get active and call the neighborhood together so that they can all go to prevent it, knocking on doors to mobilize people to prevent the foreclosure from occurring.¹¹

Each assembly chooses how to organise and what to act on, though they all organise without hierarchy. When asked about the forms of organisation the PAH takes, Cristina from Lanzarote PAH explained:

There are no hierarchies. They don't exist. But it is not that they don't exist because someone suggested it, but because it is a space where each person becomes the owner of their life and everyone has every opportunity. If we are all in control of our lives and we have all the opportunities there is no desire for someone to come and tell you what to do. The objective is that you have all the tools, all the capacity and opportunity to seek freedom and the freedom of all—so of course, hierarchy does not fit, and we don't feel it, want it ever.¹²

¹⁰ <http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/> (Accessed 29.11.2017).

¹¹ Ernest quoted in Sitrin & Azzellini, *They Can't Represent Us!*, 144–145.

¹² Cristina quoted in Marina Sitrin, "Being Poor is not a crime": transforming the struggle for housing rights worldwide', *Transformation: Where Love Meets Social Justice* (24 January 2014) (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/>

Not only does PAH continue to grow throughout Spain, but it is also now an example to other movements throughout Europe and the US. In urban areas of Germany, such as the Kreuzberg neighbourhood where I lived for a few years, neighbours not only organise to prevent evictions, but if they are unsuccessful, then they make sure through direct action that the homes affected are not rented out to others. Tactics have included preventing the showing of houses to prospective tenants and putting glue into locks on the doors. If that still does not work and a home is rented out, then activists apply social and political pressure, such as explaining to potential renters that the neighbourhood is opposed to their moving in.

In the US, dozens of groups have been organising around housing in these ways. Some, like Occupy Homes, are direct spin-offs from Occupy. They are organising neighbours to physically defend homes that are at risk of foreclosure. Often the result is that the banks involved do not go forward with the eviction, and the groups can then help the affected families to renegotiate their mortgages. Others, like the community-based groups in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods of Chicago, take over abandoned homes but state that they are going to do so publicly in advance, in order to build more publicity and gain support. There are also numerous groups that disrupt the auctions of homes that are about to be foreclosed. Actions range from singing in courtrooms in the boroughs of New York City to the San Francisco Bay area, where activists have disrupted auctions that take place on the steps of City Hall.

The actions of all these groups go much further than protecting the housing rights of vulnerable people; as movement participants reflect, they build new relationships and a different sense of self and of community, rooted in the strength and assembly-based direct action and horizontalism.

Power and the State

'*Ni Dios Ni Patria Autogestion*' was written again and again on the statue in front of the government house (Casa Rosada) in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. On the top of the statue was written '*Gracias Madres*', recognising this place as the one where the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo began publicly and heroically declaring their children missing during the dictatorship. The graffiti written below is similar to graffiti found all over towns in the years after the rebellion of 19 and 20 December 2001. Other similar graffiti read '*La Solución Autogestion*', publicly reflecting not only a sentiment but a practice that was, and is, taking place throughout the country.

Crucial in understanding the autonomous movements in Argentina today is an understanding of their different approach to power. Taking over the state through military force or otherwise is not the goal; they are creating what many have called '*otra poder*' or '*contra poder*'.¹³ This does not mean that they ignore the state or do not want to see something in its place, only that what they are doing, and their conception of revolution, is not the seizing of the government house or parliament.

transformation/marina-sitrin/%E2%80%9Cbeing-poor-is-not-crime%E2%80%9D-transforming-struggle-for-housing-rights-world) (Accessed 29.11.2017).

¹³ Colectivo Situaciones, *Apuntes para el Nuevo Protagonismo Social* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: De Mano en Mano, 2002).

Paula, a participant in queer and feminist groups at the time of the rebellion, describes the moments when it seemed possible to actually take over the government house, observing that people refused and instead turned to their neighbours and co-workers:

I have an idea of power, but it is a critical one. The concept of power, at least in the leftist tradition, has always meant that to transform society it's necessary to take power. That means to take political power, to take over the means of production, which is the classic vision. I had to laugh because after December 20th, when there were still many *cacerolazos*, which my friends and I always participate in, there was one that was particularly violent, with a lot of police repression. To escape this, we ran and jumped the fence to the Pink House [government building] and went inside. I was on television. They said that I was encroaching on the Pink House, that I was taking over the Pink House. I had to laugh. It's especially funny because at the time, my friend said, 'We can go in there, but we're not taking power. 'To us, power didn't exist anymore. The concept of taking power is archaic. What does it mean to take power? Power over what?'¹⁴

Neka, a participant in the Unemployed Workers Movement of Solano, a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, describes how what they are doing is such a change from previous ways of acting and imagining possibilities:

The issue isn't just the physical confrontation with the system. Every day, we're forced to confront a system that's completely repressive. The system tries to impose on us how and when we struggle. The question for us is how to think outside of this framework. How to manage our own time and space It's easier for them to overthrow us when we buy into concepts of power, based on looking for the most powerful-based in something like weapons or the need to arm the people. We're going to build according to our own tempo, our own conditions, and our own reality, and not let them invade it. I think this idea of power as capability and potential-not a control-is a very radical change from previous struggles.¹⁵

And Sergio, in conversation with Neka, responds affirmatively, 'The difference is thinking about power as a noun: to arrive at power, to obtain power-as if it was a thing, when power is a verb'.¹⁶

Linked to the anarchist principle of rejecting hierarchy is a different vision of power, one based on people's potential and in our relationships with one another. Anarchists reject the state and see it as a tool of oppression. That is not to say that anarchists reject governance or collective decision-making, but the state, as the armed wing of a class, is rejected. The idea is that people make decisions together and do not have them made for themselves.

In Argentina the government came back to formal power and even regained a great deal of legitimacy over the years, but that does not undermine the shift that took place in so many people in their conceptual and sometimes practical relationship to formal power. A participant in the neighbourhood assembly of Colegiales, Martin, describes:

¹⁴ Paula quoted in Sitrin, *Horizontalism*, 161–162.

¹⁵ Neka quoted in *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁶ Sergio quoted in *Ibid.*

This struggle is revolutionary, but not the way people meant revolutionary in the 1970s. It's something else, and we still haven't named it, because it's not a revolution in the sense of bringing down the state. We have to create another world, build another world—think of how to organize this other world, using a different logic. The logic of the state and the politics of representation are so entrenched in the market that, together, they have taken away our tools for social change. We're creating new ways of relating to one another. No one knows exactly how to do it. It's a collective process. No one's going to come and tell us how to do it, and it's exactly this process that is so beautiful.¹⁷

These new movements do not look to others to solve their problems, but together are finding ways to achieve—recuperate—what they consider to be a right. In Greece, for example, some neighbourhood assemblies are organising the blocking of cash registers so that people do not have to pay the newly imposed cost of health care. Sometimes the result of this is that laws are changed or rules modified, as has occurred in a few municipalities in Spain, where the local governments have ordered the police not to carry out evictions, or in neighbourhoods in Athens, where local governments have placed a hold on the collection of new taxes in response to neighbourhood assemblies' mass refusal to pay. Recuperation is a manifestation of this new way in which the movements are looking at power and autonomy: taking back what is ours. Instead of articulating demands and expecting institutional power to react, people are constructing popular power—much as the Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra—MST) in Brazil did beginning in the 1980s when they took over land to create new societies with their own schools and clinics and growing their own crops. In 2001, Argentinian workers came together, recuperating their workplaces, using the slogan of the MST ('Occupy, Resist, Produce') and putting their workplaces back to work using horizontal forms of organisation. The fact that they do not wait for governments or institutions to respond to them does not mean that no demands are ever made; in fact, many of the movements demand back from the state what they consider to be theirs anyway from their years of labour.

In Greece, the assembly of Syntagma even made a statement on the issue of power and need to self-organise. As Anestis from the Peristeri Neighborhood Assembly in Athens reflected:

A lot of people were influenced by what happened in Syntagma last summer. There was a certain political tradition of self-organizing in Greece, mostly by anarchists. But in the Syntagma mobilization a lot of people saw that, organizing this way, you can at least have your opinions heard—you can express your view clearly and express yourself more openly to others.¹⁸

Anestis then showed me the below text, one of the resolutions decided upon by those in the Square:

#603. Resolution by the Popular Assembly of Syntagma Square [...] an assembly attended by 3,000 people.

For a long time now, decisions are taken for us, without us.

¹⁷ Martin K quoted in *Ibid.*, 217–218.

¹⁸ Anestis, quoted Sitrin & Azzellini, *They Can't Represent Us!*, 93.

We are workers, unemployed, pensioners, youth who came to Syntagma to struggle for our lives and our futures.

We are here because we know that the solution to our problems can only come from us.

We invite all Athenians, the workers, the unemployed and the youth to Syntagma, and the entire society to fill up the squares and to take life into its hands.

Here, in the squares, we shall co-shape all our demands.¹⁹

In New York, Matt, one of the first participants in the New York City General Assembly, the grouping that met throughout the summer of 2011 and organised the first day of Occupy Wall Street on 17 September and the subsequent occupation of Zuccotti Park, reflected:

I guess, for me, I am a firm believer in the power of direct action and basically creating conditions where one would force the state to come to the negotiating table—and consequently making these changes, rather than the framework of demands, which is perhaps a slightly less passive form of begging or petitioning, which I think only relegitimizes the power of the state. It is obviously a very difficult question of how you address some of the very immediate suffering without giving power to the state. And for me, I think, at least part of that answer is in the direction of direct action. ... The question [we get asked] constantly: ‘What do [you] want?’ And our answer is that you have nothing that we want. What we want is from one another as people.²⁰

And in the Bay Area of San Francisco, California, Gopal, one of the initiators of Occupy Farms, discussed:

We could have been fighting to get the University of California to put an urban agriculture farm and center there. But we are not fighting to change what the University of California does on that land—we are fighting to take the land away from the University of California, and put it in a commons [...] There’s a very big difference between a campaign to change practice and a campaign to change power dynamics. So with the Take Back the Land housing fights, right now housing is understood as ‘There’s private property, and there’s public housing. There’s private land, and there’s public land.’ And the idea is to construct that third space of the people’s. And that’s where we’re trying to create, common-centered housing. How do we leverage the land trust model in a way that de-speculates the soil, that takes land off the market? That’s where it becomes about contesting for power. And there are lots of ways to do land trusts that don’t contest for power—like buying the land and then putting it into a land trust. So then it’s a one-time purchase, now it’s de-speculated ideally, but it doesn’t actually change power relationships and power dynamics, and how property is held.

So Occupy for us—just getting back to that—for us it’s this very exciting moment of, Wow! Goals without demands.²¹

¹⁹ Resolution Syntagma in *Ibid.*

²⁰ Matt quoted in *Ibid.*, 177, 178.

²¹ Gopal quoted in *Ibid.*, 180.

Prefigurative

The movements today are prefigurative movements; they focus on the social relationships in the present as the future. They are distinguished from past movements, such as those in the 1960s and 1970s, which were generally about either demanding reforms from the state or taking state power and replacing it with something better. As the interviews reflect, most in the autonomous movements are placing their energies in how and what they organise, using *horizontalidad* and *autogestion*. Most of the movements are anti-capitalist, and some anti-state, and their strategy for the creation of a new society is not grounded in either state dependency or the taking of power to create another state. Their intention is to change the world without taking power.

This is a politics that has sometimes been referred to as prefigurative. Prefigurative politics, as it sounds, is the behaving in the day to day, as much as possible, the way that you envision new social and economic relationships, the way you would want to be.²² This means, with the example of Argentina, creating horizontal relationships now, organising actively against oppression and respecting diversities. It also means creating alternative forms of exchange, education, culture, art and medicine in the here and now. To be clear, this is not a politics about dropping out of society and creating the perfect microcosm outside of society. It is about creating more space within society, more openings, and through this process creating other ways of organising and transforming society. The means are the ends as long as they are going in the direction of social transformation. It is a moving politics, one that does not have a programme. These are not new practices. Prefigurative politics, as with autonomy, organising outside the state, and *autogestion*, can be seen throughout history from the autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico, to the Regantes in Bolivia, to the Paris Commune and the Spanish revolution, as well as dozens of moments of worker and community control, from the worker Soviets in Russia to the Shora in Iran to worker and community in Argentine and Chilean history. The list is inspiringly long. At the crux however is the combination of prefigurative politics, rupture as a timeless opening, with the formation of other powers, not aimed at the state or institutional power.

Raul Zibechi summarises this way of being in conclusion to his book *Genealogia de la Revuelta*: ‘What really changes the world is to learn to live in another way, in a communitarian way, even if we do not live in communities. Brother/sisterhood is the key in social change, not war, not even class war’.²³ This concept of creating the new society now and not waiting for some time in the future to take power to then change relationships, but to create new social relationships as a part of the transformation of society, as the transformation, is an idea also rooted in the anarchist tradition. Proudhon described this phenomenon:

²² To my knowledge the first to develop the use of this the term was Wini Breines in her writing on the politics of the 1960s and what she saw as a different way of thinking and organising in part as a rejection of the centrism and vanguardism of the Communist Party. She writes: ‘The term *prefigurative politics* is used to designate an essentially anti-organizational politics characteristic of the movement, as well as parts of the new left leadership, and may be recognized in counter institutions, demonstrations and the attempt to embody personal and anti-hierarchical values in politics. Participatory democracy was central to prefigurative politics [...] The crux of prefigurative politics imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that ‘prefigured’ and embodied the desired society.’ Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962–1968: The Great Refusal* (Rutgers: Rutgers University, 1989), 6.

²³ Raul Zibechi, *Genealogia de la Revuelta: Argentina: la sociedad en movimiento* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Letra Libre, 2003), 18.

Beneath the governmental machinery, in the shadow of political institutions, out of the sight of statesmen and priests, society is producing its own organism, slowly and silently; and constructing a new order, the expression of its vitality and autonomy.²⁴

In New York our movement began first by meeting in public assemblies in a park in the Lower East Side, and then by taking over the streets and Zuccotti Park in the afternoon and evening of 17 September. We held dozens of horizontal assemblies in the afternoon and a two-thousand-person assembly in the evening, and from there the occupation began. The intention was always to meet in and use space and, of course, hopefully occupy and keep it. As with our predecessors, from whom we drew and draw imagination and inspiration, from Egypt, Greece, Israel and Spain—among countless historical examples—we wanted to not only protest something bad, not only to refuse, but to open up a new space for the experimentation with and creation of alternatives. Doing this by using or occupying public space—meaning space open for all people to come in and out of—was central to our desires.

Rather than reproducing the logic of the traditional ‘sit-in’, these occupations quickly turned to the construction of miniature models of the society that the movement wanted to create. The territory occupied was geographic, but only so as to open other ways of doing and being together. It is not the specific place that is the issue, but what happens in it. Solutions began to be implemented to urgent problems like loneliness, humiliating competition, the absence of truly representative politics and the lack of basic necessities, such as housing, education, food and health care. In Spain, Greece and the US, the first part of the occupations saw the creation of two problem-solving institutions: the general assemblies and the working groups. The occupations, in each case, rapidly became full encampments, with sleeping facilities, food, sanitation, health care, and security.

After two to three months in each case, the occupations shifted from places of encampment to places of gathering. In Greece, New York and a number of other US cities, this was due to police repression and eviction. In the case of Spain, the movement decided to focus its energy more on the assemblies and the working groups than on maintaining the encampments themselves. To maintain the miniature models of a society that the movement wished to create did not necessarily contribute to the actual changes that were needed in the populations that needed them the most. Which is why, in Spain, the decision to move away from the encampments was another impulse in the constructive aims of the movement: the real encampment that has to be reconstructed is the world. In the US and Greece, we were forced to end the encampment as a place for sleeping and housing, but also in both places the movement is getting stronger bases in new territories, re-territorialising in other neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces and communities.

In Spain and Greece, movement participants describe how much more profound they find the organising. Creating assemblies in public space, using space to create territory and where new relationships develop and prefigurative politics can flourish, based now more in the concrete day-to-day needs of people in the neighbourhoods.

²⁴ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*. Translated by John Beverly Robinson (New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., [1851] 1969), 243.

Concluding with Another Sort of Political

The autonomous social movements in Argentina, since 2001 in particular, have begun to articulate a new and revolutionary politics. This politics is seen in various new practices and in the expressions they use to describe these practices. Some say that they are not political or that they are anti-political. Often this is related to their experiences in 'old ways of doing politics, with the use of hierarchy and political parties to make decisions for people, taking away their agency. They are engaged in the politics of everyday life. Remarkably similar are the conversations I had with people across the US during and after the Occupy movement, as well as in Spain, Greece, Italy and later France with *Nuit Debout*. People did not want to identify politically and often said what they were doing was not politics—or not political.

People are seeing themselves creating the future in their present, through new, directly democratic relationships. They reject hierarchy, bosses, managers, party representation and often traditional unions. Simply put, they reject people attempting to have power over others. They organise themselves in every setting, and do so relying on themselves and each other, *autogestionandose*, in communities, neighbourhoods, work places, schools and universities. What is the name of this revolutionary process: *horizontalidad*? *autogestion*? socialism? anarchism? autonomy? none of these? all of them? It is a process that does not have one name. It is a process of continuous creation, constant growth and development of new relations, with ideas flowing from these changing practices.

The question then is: is it useful to place these new movements in a theoretical and historical framework so as to better understand them and add to our understandings of social change as socialists, anarchists or autonomists? I do not think so. I do not think we should place any of the movements in a single framework. That said, I do think that certain concepts of anarchism or non-authoritarian socialism can help in understanding some of the practices and principles of these movements. These movements also lend examples and experiences to the non-authoritarian tradition. I do not intend to play with words or be ambiguous here. I do not think it is the role of an anarchist, for example, to tell other people they are anarchists, especially when they choose explicitly to not identify as such. The same is true of autonomists or socialists. What I do think one can do however is look at the similarities, listen carefully to the new practices and articulations and draw parallels so that each can learn from one another. As long as it is in the process of creating a more liberated world, and learning from one another in the process, does it really matter what it is called?

While there is no one definition of anarchism, which is some of its beauty, Emma Goldman's 'Anarchism: What it Really Stands For' provides a conceptual place holder in which the newer movements can either enter into, move through, pass along side of, or continue onward from:

Anarchism is not, as some may suppose, a theory of the future to be realized through divine inspiration. It is a living force in the affairs of our life, constantly creating new conditions. The methods of Anarchism therefore do not comprise an iron-clad program to be carried out under all circumstances [...] Anarchism, then, really stands for the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion; the liberation of the human body from the dominion of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government. Anarchism stands for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth; an order that will

guarantee to every human being free access to the earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations.²⁵

²⁵ Emma Goldman, 'Anarchism: What it Really Stands For' http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_archives/goldman/aando/anarchism.html (Accessed 29.11.2017).

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