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The Anarchist Spirit

Marina Sitrin

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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 would call an anarchist spirit—a way of organizing and relating that opposes hierarchy and embraces direct democracy. This is a spirit that we should applaud and help to flourish. Although they may not define themselves as ideologically anarchist or even always be aware of the connection, these new movements nonetheless have much in common with ideas developed by historical anarchists like Emma Goldman, Murray Bookchin, and the libertarian left in Spain during the 1930s.

Anarchism is not a unified ideology or theory, but it does emphasize a few core beliefs: opposition to both capitalism and the state, an emphasis on face-to-face relationships, and pre-figurative ways of organizing society. Some anarchists look to the working class as the main agent of change; for others, it's

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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 organization, structure, rules, accountability, or decentralized forms of governance.

Many commentators on the left have criticized recent movements like Occupy in the United States, the Squares movements in Spain and Greece, and even the Zapatistas in Mexico by labeling them anarchist, often in an attempt to dismiss them as unserious, violent, or opposed to building political parties or taking state power. But if we want to change the world, we should listen closely to what these newer movements are thinking and doing, instead of seeking to confine them in an ideological box.

Contemporary movements, such as PAH (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, the housing defense movement in Spain), the autonomous Social Solidarity Clinics in Greece, most of the land defense movements in Argentina, and Occupy, to name only a few, emerged from communities and neighborhoods of all kinds. They are not mobilized or organized by a union, specific group, or political party. They organize 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. Above all, they subscribe to prefigurative politics—they embody the future they wish to see in their day-to-day relationships. They reject hierarchy, and ground their organizing in affect and trust.

The current surge in this new form of organizing began most significantly in 1994 with the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico. Rather than making demands on institutional power, they created dozens of autonomous communities where tens of thousands of people collectively decided on all matters related to the running of their lives and societies, from health care and education, to defense and governance.

In Argentina, during the popular rebellion of 2001, people sang in the streets, “*Que Se Vayan Todos! Que No Quede Ni Uno Solo!*” (Everyone Must Go! Not Even One Should Remain!). The rebellion was a response to the government freezing people’s bank accounts in the context of an economic crisis, and a rejection of the government, but also an expression of being fed up with being told what to do. People there organized thousands of horizontal neighborhood assemblies (the language of *horizontalidad* was first used at this moment in history in Argentina). The formerly middle class and the unemployed on the outskirts of the cities organized in assemblies for their survival and in the process, transformed themselves and their communities. Workers took back—recuperated—their workplaces, running them collectively, without hierarchy or bosses, and creating a new relationship to value and exchange.

These newer movements are looking to one another for power, and creating it, horizontally and through self-organization. The state is increasingly rejected as the site from which to change society. Distinct from people who identify as anarchists, most members of newer movements reject the state out of experience and based on their observations from recent history. Foreclosures and evictions continue, water is being shut off in cities and towns from Palestine to Detroit, cuts to public spending and austerity measures are increasing, and land is being plundered by fracking and mining, with no respite in sight.

After all, why should people turn to the institutions that are responsible for their problems for solutions? Instead, everywhere we see people taking matters into their own hands: affected people have themselves blocked mining companies in Greece and Argentina, and prevented pipes from being laid for fracking across the Americas. In Argentina the Malvinas Assembly stopped Monsanto from constructing what would have been the world’s largest genetically modified seed processing plant. Foreclosures in Spain, Chicago, and

San Francisco have been prevented by neighbors coming together and blocking the eviction and auction of homes, and neighbors have also prevented high-end buyers from surveying apartments in working-class neighborhoods, such as Kreuzberg in Berlin. This is not a politics of demanding that others stop exploitation, but stopping it themselves through collective direct action. Distinct from traditional social movements, these are self-organized communities that see the process of the struggle and its goal as interconnected. Again, one can see the anarchist touch here—the spirit of non-hierarchy, horizontalism, and anti-statism—even if people in these movements do not identify themselves as such.

The anarchist spirit can be seen most vividly in the massive assemblies that have taken over parks and plazas—from Occupy to Gezi Park in Turkey, to the Plenums in Bosnia, to 15-M in Spain, to Syntagma Square in Greece. What drives these assemblies is a profound determination both to speak and be heard. As a participant in the PAH, the housing defense movement in Barcelona explained to me,

15-M is something that will leave a mark on you forever. It has affected hundreds of thousands of individuals, one by one, that means millions of people who will never be the same again. . . . I had goosebumps during those days. I couldn't believe it. Plaça Catalunya was full of people . . . speaking with megaphones, communicating together. . . . I never believed in my lifetime that I could see something like this, even in my dreams, and instead, it existed there.