

How Much is Lost in Translation?

A Response to Gabriel Kuhn's Review of *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street*

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December 2013

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In his thorough and insightful review of *Translating Anarchy* Gabriel Kuhn raises crucial questions about a number of issues, but in this response I will limit myself to tackling the issue that is most central to the argument of the book, namely the question of how American anarchists ought to communicate with the rest of society and when, if ever, some element of ‘translation’ ought to be incorporated into anarchist self-expression in the USA.

In what follows I will attempt to clarify the book’s central argument: that it was often useful in the specific context of Occupy Wall Street in New York City for many of the movement’s anarchist organizers to emphasize anarchist ideas without the ideological label when communicating with the wider public. I hope that the following remarks will assuage the concerns that some readers may have with this rhetorical experiment.

To start, I think it’s essential to distinguish between what is said and who is saying it. By that I mean that when we evaluate different styles of political expression we need to hinge our assessment on what kind of political entity is behind any given statement. In his review, Kuhn cites the Austrian Communist Party as an example of an organization that took the opposite approach: rather than ‘translating’ their politics they emphasized their ideological label. From Kuhn’s perspective, this party is an example of using an ideological label and gaining support because of it (or despite it, perhaps).

Yet I don’t think it’s a fair comparison with Occupy since OWS was not a coherent political organization. I agree that anarchist political organizations and collectives *should* explicitly speak about anarchism. One of their main purposes should be to clarify what anarchism is and has been, and hopefully convince more people to be anarchists. I certainly agree that periodicals and materials put out by anarchist political groups should not read like “any lefty-liberal rag.” But that level of ideological unity was not possible with OWS. As I describe in the book, only about 39% of NYC organizers self-identified with the term ‘anarchist,’ and given our consensus decision-making structures we would have needed far more anarchists to have adorned the entire group with the Circle-A, if we had wanted to.

But we didn’t. A crucial element of my argument is that OWS would have been a negligible blip on the local left scene at best if the anarchists who played leading roles in organizing the movement over the summer of 2011 had specified a clear-cut anarchist ideology with anarchist symbolism for the group (which would never have become anything resembling a movement). After all, in New York, as elsewhere in the USA, there have been (and are) plenty of explicitly anarchist groups and projects which have organized public events which are vitally important to the progress of anarchism (and it would have been useful to have had more in NYC during OWS) but on their own they have thus far not stimulated any mass movements on their own (and usually that isn’t even their immediate goal).

And they wouldn’t have in this case either. OWS as a movement essentially got going because of the media/public response to the police pepper spray attack followed by the Brooklyn Bridge arrests in late Sept/early Oct 2011. If those events had been carried out under an exclusively anarchist banner the turnouts wouldn’t have been nearly so large (even most NYC anarchists wouldn’t have consistently showed up) and we would have had just another case of police brutality against anarchists which the media would have dismissed as ‘anarchists being anarchists.’ “Just the usual smashy smashy here folks, nothing to see, carry on..”

The public response we generated stemmed in large part from journalists following up on the brutality and asking us what we wanted. And the fact of the matter is that people came down in droves because we said things like “Banks got bailed out/We got sold out” and “Wall Street

has wrecked the economy but they're still getting their Christmas bonuses," whereas if we had said something like "we're here because we oppose capital, the state and all forms of domination and are trying to instigate a class war to inaugurate libertarian communism," OWS as a mass phenomenon wouldn't have happened. After all, that would, more or less, be one of the more comprehensive ways to frame the anarchist agenda but it would have shut down a potential movement before it started.

This is not conjecture. It's not one of those distant hypotheticals. In a country where even the word 'class' itself is fraught with economic 'divisiveness' to the point where pundits speak of 'low-income' families or 'underprivileged' and 'disadvantaged' groups, with the only exception being the omnipresent 'middle class,' it's an uphill battle that we usually lose trying to explain something like libertarian communism or a vision of a stateless global federation in 30 second sound bites.

Becoming Revolutionary

What does this mean for the project of advancing anarchism in the United States? What is gained and what is lost in the process of 'translation'?

Kuhn raises some important questions about the tactic of 'translation.' He is concerned that "making anarchism more accessible" might cause anarchism to "lose its special characteristics." In citing the success of the Austrian Communist Party he draws the lesson that often "the apparently negative connotation of the name ['communist' in this case but presumably also 'anarchist'] is overrated: when your politics are good, people will support you." More broadly he writes, "I can't help thinking that for people to become revolutionaries they must be convinced by revolutionary politics and not by some down-tuned version of it."

So, to take a step back, how *do* people become revolutionaries? Certainly this question has been debated for many years and is too large to be answered in full here, but a few observations might be helpful. I would argue that, in general, most people who adopt a revolutionary political orientation do not transition from an opposite extreme in one big step. Most people who become revolutionaries, it seems to me, have already undergone some amount of political and social conditioning that has pre-disposed them to accepting the revolutionary ideology before finally adopting it. There are very few people who go from voting for the Republican Party to joining a council communist sect overnight.

Historically this seems clear. In the case of Spanish anarchism, the words of Bakunin's emissary Giuseppe Fanelli wouldn't have spread like wildfire in the nineteenth century if much of the Spanish population weren't already predisposed to anarchism as a result of factors such as the popularity of federal republicanism and resistance to centralizing liberal initiatives, strong rural traditions of regional and local autonomy, absence of the franchise, a super reactionary brand of Catholicism, massive concentration of agricultural land in the latifundia, and a long conspiratorial tradition of essentially affinity group-based revolutionary organizing. Most people who became anarchists during this era did so because they were pretty close already.

In a country like Austria it is far less shocking to see the success of a Communist Party than it would be in the USA given the long history of communist organizing in that country and the fact that socialism is in the mainstream of political discourse. In Spain or Austria there is far less ground to cover to move most people to the revolutionary left than in the United States.

Although it's obvious to point out, it's worth keeping in mind that people usually form their politics based on what their families think, what their friends, co-workers and religious peers think. They are influenced by the media, entertainment, and in the American context many are subconsciously swayed by the construction of conservatism as the masculine embodiment of cool rationality, economic pragmatism, and individual merit while liberalism and all things left are seen as idealistic, 'bleeding-heart', sentimental, hippy, and ultimately soft, spoiled, and effeminate. (And here I'm not advocating the creation or resurrection of a 'left masculinity' in the USA, just mapping the landscape we're faced with).

Therefore, while it is usually true that "when your politics are good, people will support you," you can only get to that point when people (a) know what your politics are and (b) have some measure of pre-existing comfort or familiarity with the underlying premises that undergird your political proposals. Those are steps that cannot be overcome all at once with a straightforward platform.

In the case of OWS, if the initial small organizing group had restricted itself to anarchism early on, very few people would have even known what their politics were (since they would have been ignored by everyone *including most anarchists*, actually), and the few who did would have dismissed them out of hand once they heard them associated with the chronically misunderstood label of 'anarchism' (or associated with any specific political orientation at all since Americans are especially wary of 'ideology').

I actually agree with Kuhn that "for people to become revolutionaries they must be convinced by revolutionary politics and not by some down-tuned version of it" but the burning question is how we can get more people to be exposed to revolutionary politics in a meaningful, substantive context where they will be prone to find them appealing. Sticking to the usual anarchist playbook of making OWS explicitly anarchist in August 2011 would have prevented a lot of people from coming into any contact with revolutionary politics at all, 'down-tuned' or otherwise.

And what we tried had more success in promoting anarchism and making anarchists than anything I'd ever been a part of. At a crucial juncture early on in the development of OWS, when the movement could have slid in a liberal direction and become a voter-registration drive for Obama, a dedicated core of anarchists and anti-authoritarians managed to brand it a non-electoral, directly democratic, autonomous, direct action-oriented social movement committed to the values of solidarity and mutual aid working toward the creation of a democratic, non-exploitative economy that prioritizes human need. That certainly isn't all of what anarchism has to offer but it's not that far away.

In so doing, we managed to nudge mainstream politics a little in an anarchist direction (recognizing that the goal is really far off) and make more people predisposed to an anarchist outlook. Moreover, we managed to bring in a good number of people (especially young people) who gradually became anarchists as they personally participated in direct actions and networks of solidarity, but told me that they never would have joined an 'anarchist' group at first because they thought anarchism was 'crazy.' As I delivered book talks this fall in cities like Toronto and Rochester NY, I met people who told me that they had experienced a similarly gradual anarchist transformation through Occupy.

My research demonstrates that the best way to make anarchists, at least over here, is to get people acting like anarchists and that sometimes means saving the 'a-word' for later though *not discarding it*. After all, this process worked because new people were brought into radical politics through open, yet anti-authoritarian, messaging but then exposed to explicitly anarchist

messaging through groups like In Our Hearts and informal groups and individuals so that their radical experiences could be cemented in a larger and more thorough ideological framework. In this context a significant number of organizers who had gotten their hands dirty with anti-authoritarian politics were “convinced by revolutionary politics” rather than “by some down-tuned version” once they had the kinds of experiences and social relationships that are often necessary for people to be open to them.

Now this is not to dismiss entirely Kuhn’s fears of anarchism being diluted or misunderstood. That is always a risk. However prior to Occupy, anarchism was quite misunderstood already and the usual formula wasn’t doing much to help. To me, restricting anarchist self-expression to small political organizations that use the a-word (which are really the only vehicles for explicit anarchist propagandizing in the USA) does more to further the misconceptions that people have of anarchism as the result of its comfort with passively ceding the field of public opinion to our detractors than the ‘translation’ outlook which, however imperfectly, tries to make a dent in popular perceptions on things like direct democracy or direct action, *thereby opening space for explicitly anarchist groups to propagandize.*

Radical Chic

Kuhn is understandably worried that with this method “In the worst case, you’re opening up a niche for anarchism as a cute, utopian, principled ideology that one can engage in – philosophically or practically – in order to feel better, escape existential boredom, or experiment with radical chic.” And that is quite possible, or maybe even likely, but I would argue that it is actually a very common by-product of the success of any revolutionary ideology that we shouldn’t be so frightened of. For example in France in the 1890s Kuhn’s description above would have applied perfectly to the Parisian ‘anarchist’ scene in the art world with figures like Félix Fénéon, Octave Mirbeau, and Adolphe Retté flirting with what might be considered ‘radical chic.’

And certainly in the 60s and 70s there were plenty of artists and intellectuals who adopted communist and revolutionary postures when it suited them without having a long-lasting and deep ideological commitment. Anarcho-punk is an example of ‘radical chic’ and although most of the anarcho-punks I knew growing up did not end up as revolutionaries, a bunch did. Especially in our digital age I think it’s inevitable that revolutionary politics will be accompanied by some measure of ‘radical chic’ if they gain traction but that’s *not entirely a bad thing*. Now don’t get me wrong, like Kuhn I believe that we ought to do as much as we can to promote anarchism as a solid doctrine of revolutionary organization and praxis. However, many people only open themselves up to new ideas or new (or really *any*) methods of struggle if they feel like doing so has some social import.

That was plainly clear with OWS. Thousands of people got involved and many of them came because it was sexy. Certainly most scampered away once the sex appeal faded, but some spent enough time in the movement to have developed a life-long commitment to the struggle.

I really can’t fathom a situation where anarchism grows in popularity to the point that an anarchist revolution would be even a distant possibility without anarchism becoming ‘radical chic’ for *some* people. The key is to try to work with such people to segue from chic to a more substantive engagement with the movement. It’s also true, though, that some people won’t ex-

tend their commitment beyond being supporters of a potential revolutionary movement. Try as hard as we like, we will never have an entire world of organizers (maybe that's a good thing).

So if a moderately muddled understanding of anarchism grounded in its aesthetics or existential elements makes some people side with us rather than some hypothetical corporate-fascist robot army of the future, then so be it.

We ought to be vigilant against the tendency of liberalism to corrupt anarchism. In the book I emphasize that danger which is especially pervasive in the USA. But to me, the way to do that is not to isolate anarchist ideas from liberals for fear of liberal contamination. That may preserve them, but revolutionary ideas hopefully have not become fragile artifacts decorating museum walls. Liberal ideas *can* corrupt anarchist ideas, but the reverse is also true.

Anarchist ideas can be revolutionary contaminants gradually corroding liberal values. While it's true that this process of ideological interaction produces a lot of indeterminate politics, it also creates openings and opportunities for explicitly anarchist education to happen. It's a lot easier to educate people about anarchism once you've already convinced them about direct democracy, for example. The more that we have premises in common with the rest of society, the easier it is to come to some of the same conclusions.

Political Honesty

The final issue to address is honesty. In his review Kuhn characterizes the 'translation' approach as dishonest because we did not speak openly about 'anarchism' or being 'anarchists.' Not surprisingly, I disagree with this interpretation of the tactic.

When OWS anarchists who refrained from using the 'a-word' spoke to the press or someone new to the movement we didn't say anything we didn't believe in. We spoke about most of the ideological contents of anarchism, such as mutual aid, direct democracy, opposition to hierarchy, or direct action, in all sincerity though without the umbrella term for them.

It's true that calling for a new economy oriented around human need is not exactly the same thing as calling for libertarian communism, for example. But it is true that I want a new economy oriented around need, and actually, given the horrible associations that people have with the word 'communism,' an average listener would come away from my remarks about 'an economy oriented around need' with a much clearer understanding of what I advocate than they would if I threw out 'communism' which would have conjured up Stalin and gulags.

So does political honesty require that we use the same vocabulary with all audiences even if certain words will, despite our best efforts, mean *completely* different things when we use them? Is honesty using specialized words that in a technical sense best approximate our positions, but in practical effect communicate a meaning that couldn't possibly be farther from our intention? Or, is it using less specific words that leave listeners with a much more accurate interpretation of the idea being expressed? Is the goal to maximize the amount of truth being communicated to the listener?

In other words, is it dishonest to do the best one can do to accurately communicate one's perspective to an audience that is unfamiliar with the issue at hand and only has a short window of time to listen even if it means focusing on certain ideas more than others and adjusting one's vocabulary? I don't think so.

Nor do I think it was dishonest at the turn of the twentieth century when Ricardo Flores Magón called his revolutionary group the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM) or Francisco Ferrer called his anarchist school the Modern School.

But even if some readers disagree with my assessment, I'd rather have more 'dishonest' anarchistic social movements than 'honest' book clubs.

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