Forms of decay of the political and the recovery of a holistic social-revolutionary praxis

Mona Alona

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Teaser: This contribution is subjective. With it I draw from the reflection on own experiences and perceptions, about which I write nevertheless, because I derive from the special also some aspects of the general - which have their validity only if - or to which degree - others find themselves in it. Originally I developed these thoughts at the threshold of the 30th year of life, at which, as is well known, the majority of the remaining comrades withdraw from the anarchist scene.

Structural conditions of self-organized, social-revolutionary (anti-)politics

The compulsion to wage labor and its consequences, responsibility for a child, the licking of wounds inflicted over the years in political struggles, as well as the realization that the remaining life is getting shorter and therefore has to be enjoyed - these are understandable reasons why people can spend less time on political activities. Hour-long plenaries in which decisions and agreements are not made, tasks are not clearly distributed, and goals are not set no longer work then. Neither is there time to visit all kinds of demonstrations or events, which is, however, important to stay up to date and to keep in touch with a scene that is often changing quite rapidly. In two respects, then, it is a matter of structural problems why politically active people often find it more difficult with increasing age to engage in anarchism - beyond their own hopefully preserved attitudes.

The compulsion to wage labor is one that we are fighting against - to get more out of life, which includes fighting to change this society. A child should be given the attention and care it needs, and there are (unfortunately) few working alternatives practiced to the occasional supportive single parent and the couple thrown back on themselves. As far as the psychological burden is concerned, it is also hardly taken into consideration that older comrades often carry even more, which slows down their activity and in this respect it is also desirable that they take care of themselves instead of wasting away. So the question is how a political scene manages to deal with the social demands that affect individuals but are nevertheless structural. The questions of how we can, for example, collectively take care of children, reduce the pressure of wage labor, or support ourselves psychologically, are in this respect not ones that are primarily about building a nice solidary togetherness. Rather, they are about creating the conditions for anarchist (anti-)politics.

The importance of working on social relations and manners in anti-authoritarian contexts

However, this also includes the dimension of interpersonal interaction among comrades ("Genoss*innen"). I do not write of "companions" ("Gefährt*innen) because this designation represents for me a desirable form of deep affinity. In my opinion, this is very important, but (anti-)politics is made with several, with many. In this sense, I also do not write about "friends" - even though it is nice when cooperative relationships are shaped in a friendly way. What I mean by "comrade" actually seems to me to be something specific - something that needs to be worked on. People are sympathetic or less sympathetic to each other, have a need for recognition, want to be needed and respected, and often also want to determine where things

go - this is all familiar and is precisely the social aspect that characterizes us. But how "we" deal with social dynamics in self-organized political contexts still seems to me to receive too little attention, despite consensus trainings, hierarchy reflections or social plena. Here I think it's important that "we" don't behave like assholes, but on the contrary have the aspiration to develop together. But also in this context, it is quite crucial to create the conditions for people to be politically active in a good way for as long as possible. And not mainly about creating a cozy feel-good bubble.

Just think about:

- The eternal wrangling for power in a grassroots group (which never ends, because in anti-authoritarian groups there would supposedly be no leaders);

- the instability and rapid change in the composition of the groups;

- the exclusionary coolness factor that longer existing groups as a whole and especially types who see themselves as cadres exude;

- the emotional and social needs that are often brought into seemingly "objective" political discussions and activities in a completely non-transparent way;

- the sometimes spasmodic criticism of one's own privileges as an expression of an attitude of self-abasement

... All of these are social patterns (repeated in different places and times) that generate inability to act and lead to frustration.

The claim to want to completely dismantle these dynamics would, of course, be completely exaggerated. In other words, it cannot be the goal to start from an ideal image of a functioning autonomous group, then to apply this standard to one's own group(s) and to form them social-technocratically according to it. First of all, although we can continuously learn from each other (not only as individuals, but also as different social groups and movements), there are no patent remedies. While we should think "solution-oriented," we should not assume that there is "the" "right" solution. Likewise, we should strive for decisions, but not let the decision become a constraint on us if it is not sufficiently supported by everyone. Secondly, the creative possibilities of a group and its members are limited because the difficulties we face have social causes. However, we cannot and should not want to "solve" these in an individualized way.

It is therefore necessary to find out to what extent individuals can and should change in confrontation with one another in order to create a functioning social context that meets emancipatory demands. And at which points it is a matter of accepting peculiarities of people or being so consistent as not to work together with them if that does not seem possible.

In short, the art of organizing a self-organized, anti-authoritarian group lies in improvisation. One part of it is negative, insofar as it is imposed on us by impermanent, oppressive, exhausting, and highly complex social demands. But the other part of it is also positive, because emancipatory politics is also about ourselves as peculiar and stubborn human beings in each case. "We" have the claim not to deny ourselves in political practice, but (out of necessity) to want to realize a piece of ourselves. Because in order to be able to build a fundamentally different society, we (also) have to deal with and dismantle our own alienation.

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Changing everything - between the experience of powerlessness and self-efficacy.

This leads to the topic of dealing with our own demands. In antiauthoritarian scene - or even social-revolutionary - groups, they are known to be often very large. This is also a good thing, because it is important to think big in order to make concrete practice social-revolutionary on a small scale (which can take very different forms). However, the great claim of wanting to radically and comprehensively change the existing society can become an overwhelming project, which the respective group as a whole fails at or which is imposed by individuals on others and can poison the togetherness. In my opinion, much could be done to counteract this if individuals and groups as a whole would, on the one hand, realistically assess their capacities and accordingly set themselves goals that they can achieve step by step. On the other hand, if they would become aware of what demands they each carry within themselves, how they themselves deal with them, how they project them onto others, and where they actually come from. Like everything subjective, the feeling of "revolutionary obsession" does not come from God or from a fixed "inwardness" of the individual, but is socially and societally conditioned.

In any case, the claim to want to change everything leads, in my observation, in many politically active people to a constant fluctuation between overestimation and impotence, between mania and depression. This can extend over different phases, over a period of several years or even just a few days. If several members of a group are on this continuous emotional roller coaster, this in turn has a strong effect on the social dynamics within them and makes it immensely difficult to work continuously, consistently and pragmatically as a group. I have nothing against playful (anti-)political activity; on the contrary, I see it as desirable.

However, the struggle against the existing order of domination cannot only be play, but must - regrettably - also be work. The point for me, again, is not to criticize certain people for this vacillating sensibility and behavior, but to point out the enormous challenges this poses for antiauthoritarian politics. In this respect, a step in the right direction is to become aware that the ambivalent experience of self-efficacy and powerlessness is neither a purely individual one, nor merely one of the "scene", but that we are subject to permanent demands to be active and to limit ourselves. On the job market, as in social constellations or the search for sexual contacts (which in turn are strongly influenced by the logic of the capitalist market), we are supposed to be "team players" as well as "assertive", "willing to compromise" as well as "strong-willed", "mobile" as well as "tangible", "flexible" as well as "steady", "independent" as well as "obedient", "special" as well as "normal". - No wonder it is impossible to meet these contradictory requirements. What is important is that we understand how they affect us - and how we can develop and live rebellious alternatives to them in our own emancipatory groups, instead of still celebrating and going along with the logics of neoliberal self-realization and self-fulfillment.

On the holistic practice of social-revolutionary (anti-)politics

After these remarks it becomes clear: self-organized, radical and emancipatory (anti-)politics faces enormous challenges. Moreover, it can only be considered "politics" if it is collectively oriented - whether it is carried out in a particular group, however shaped, or moves and orients itself in the context of social movements. Many people leave it at a certain point. They leave, what

it is to do, (anti-)political practice in the melee. When I write this, I am making an indeterminate positing. Further, I determine this (anti-)political practice as a holistic one (= ”comprehensive”/ ”holistic”) in three ways: first, it refers to and considers society as a whole, even if it is usually devoted to particular aspects or issues separately. Secondly, this means locating oneself socially and historically, i.e. understanding one's own class, race and gender position in the specific social formation. Only on this basis can social-revolutionary (anti-)politics be pursued. Intersections and connections with people in other positions of the social hierarchy will only become possible when we understand - and relate to - our own and other life conditions and worlds.

Third, by ”holistic” in this context, I mean developing and living an (anti-)political practice that relates to us as whole and peculiar human beings - but which we only become in connection and engagement with others. This is a counter-project to the supposedly ”professional” politics practiced by most party politicians, trade unionists, as well as movement managers, which is based on the division of ”political” and ”private”. Thus, holistic (anti-)politics in the sense understood here actually also reaches the limits of what can still be called ”politics”. So far I can only call it (anti-)politics - but this is another story...

Behind this, however, is the following thought: what I have called here holistic (anti-)politics in the self-organized framework of an anti-authoritarian scene is a tense tightrope act, a tightrope walk or a borderline walk. It is precisely from these tensions that social-revolutionary forms of (anti-)politics can emerge. They are a reflection of the ambivalence (= ”dichotomy”) between the distance to the existing society and being stuck in it. At the same time, they proceed from the idea and possibility of concrete utopias, which are unfolded without and against the dominating relations. If we assume that the set (and to be further defined) description of social-revolutionary (anti-)politics is the standard by which our actions should be oriented, it is possible to name deviations from it. They can be found in pre-political, pseudo-political and post-political phases.

- This sounds harsh, but it seems appropriate to me because many people I have met define their respective activities themselves in relation to a fictional ideal of ”radical-politics-making” and justify themselves for doing so. To make the point a little clearer, I sharpen it and speak of ”decay forms” of the political. This assumes, however, that there ”used to be” a ”good” or ”right” political. This does not seem to me to be the case. The reference to a supposedly better earlier time only distracts from the task of seriously dealing with the given conditions.When I formulate this idea of ”forms of decay”, this means to address repetitive phenomena, but not to condemn people.

Accordingly, the goal is not to change people or even to educate them, but to look at the structures in which they find themselves and to talk about standards by which we (can) orient ourselves. From this, of course, criticism (of group structures, behaviors, rhetoric, etc.) can still be formulated. Finally, this observation is subjective, which is why I do not claim that it is universally valid. It is valid only to the degree that people can apply it to their context and to their groups or scenes and find themselves in it...

In the following, I name five forms of decay of the political in their pre-, pseudo- or post-political manifestations. This means that it is not about the complete abandonment of the political, but about something else that comes in political garb and therefore undermines it. All things have two sides. Accordingly, I approach it in such a way that I try to discover positive aspects in these tendencies to escape from holistic social-revolutionary (anti-)politics. Or rather, I want to understand what is missing in it and what comes up short in it.

a) Unconscious hedonism

Politics is often perceived as unsexy, and quite rightly so. So, in phases, new attempts are made to combine it with life-affirming elements. Such attempts can be found, among other things, in party culture, which, for example, in the form of techno, actually had a strong political content at its origin and then became commercialized and suitable for the masses. Combining politics with joie de vivre is by no means just a tactical attempt to connect with the youth or to politicize celebration culture. Rather, elements actually appear in the hedonistic experience that for us point to a desirable future society (for all). The diverse experience of the senses, pleasure, community, multiplicity and fluidity (= ”indeterminacy,” ”openness”) of our selves, etc. is something that societies aligned with anarchist ideas must necessarily include. Self-enjoyment and self-development are not luxury goods, but desirable goals for all people. According to Epicurus, by the way, we do not achieve these at all through excessive consumption and self-expression, which can be sold to us, but through knowing and fulfilling our ”real” needs.

But by organizing solidarity-parties, raves, self-organized festivals and the like, several (anti-)political groups have mutated into mere party collectives. Organizing something like that is more fun and attracts more people than, for example, a simple rally. The misperception of one’s own activity, however, goes so far that liberation itself is seen in the supposed ”meeting of equals on the dance floor” - a weak idea to cover one’s own escapism from reality.

b) Arrogant dogmatism

Dogmatism occurs in all currents of the political spectrum. Those who call themselves ”undogmatic” should therefore think all the more about what principles they actually start from. There is, of course, nothing wrong with starting from certain principles that may be condemned as ”dogmas” in bourgeois ideology. Whoever does this lightly is usually not prepared to look into the eyes of the facts or even to develop his own positions. For example, in my opinion it is pointless to discuss the question whether capitalism must be overcome or not.

However, one’s own libertarian-socialist point of view has to be justified factually and communicated in an understandable way in order to enlighten and convince people. If the attempts at justification and communication cease, one’s own ideology actually solidifies into a set of encrusted dogmas. Reality is always (considerably) more complex than one’s own convictions and patterns of interpretation are able to grasp. Therefore, the dogmatic perspective is limited and cannot become social-revolutionary per se, because it is not able to grasp social conditions in their complexity. For this would also mean to allow others to arrive at other convictions with full consciousness. Only through the (important) differences can common ground then be sought, based on a respectful foundation. The organization of anti-authoritarian groups can fail because dogmatists first want to bring all members to their line or continuously try to do so during the common work, thus basically acting instrumentally.

c) Merciless moralism

Closely related to dogmatism is moralism. From it speaks the important insight that social-revolutionary (anti-)politics is emancipatory only if it is accompanied by the development of the policy-makers themselves. The boring Gandhi quote ”Be yourself the change you wish to see in this world” has its truth in the fact that we cannot (at least not primarily) do emancipatory politics for others. Instead, we have to transform ourselves in order to become credible or ”true” and to live our own values not someday, but today. Strangely enough, it is precisely this great demand, on ourselves, that can tip over into rigorous moralism - And thereupon be imposed on others. Morality, like the so-called ”feeling”, eludes a justification and whoever lets it apply alone or is blackmailed by it, affirms irrationality. This is, in my view, the flat opposite of the consideration

of how "we" can meaningfully integrate ethics and emotions into a social-revolutionary (anti-)politics. After all, they form its (often unacknowledged) starting point anyway. Often people who are afflicted by merciless moralism, as well as dogmatists, have a relatively unstable personality, or low self-respect. Therefore, they seek refuge in supposedly correct behavior with which they can claim moral authority over others.

d) Unreserved actionism

The criticism of anarchists that they are head over heels in actionism is wrong for three reasons. First, there are unfortunately not so many direct actions, second, convinced anarchists usually think well about their activities. And third, it's okay to "do something first and then see what it does to us". We learn ten times more by our own experiences, by trying out new things, than by thinking through all possible situations and eventualities. However, here already lie two pitfalls of actionism: Firstly, it is not primarily used to try out something new, but rather to reproduce the same forms of action over and over again. Secondly, learning from experience presupposes reflecting on it. But this is exactly what is missing in unreserved actionism, which is an end in itself, because it is meant to compensate for the feeling of one's own helplessness and powerlessness.

Perhaps it is often better to do something than to resign in the face of the numbness of the world. Sometimes, however, it is not, if we can instead endure our negative feelings and then reorient ourselves. If we do not do this, the consequences are obvious: the internalized compulsion to perform is imposed on others as a demand, whereupon they feel intimidated and/or inadequate. However, this only happens until the actionists themselves succumb to burnout. Examples of this can be found in heaps. Characteristically, I have experienced numerous demonstrations for which the participants neither prepared well beforehand nor discussed and evaluated the experience afterwards - beyond telling a few stories. Preparation and debriefing are practices that must be learned and can be passed on. They are the preconditions for self-determined action at demonstrations, the course of which is not set in stone, but can certainly be shaped. Where this does not happen, demonstrations become boring walks or meaningless cat-and-mouse games.

e) Pure theory work

Basically the flip side of the one-dimensional thought "propaganda by deeds" is the pure theory work. With this text I prove at least the tendency to succumb to this form of decay. The theoretical discussion of emancipatory (anti-)politics in the anti-authoritarian scene is admittedly a self-chosen attempt to reflect on the inadequacies perceived in it. However, it would be misguided if it did not (or no longer) manage to dock onto the reality of social movements and was guided by the interest in wanting to reach those active in them in terms of form, language and content. Theoretical work becomes an end in itself when the theoreticians want to prove to each other and, above all, to themselves that they are capable of thinking through aspects of anti-authoritarian politics in depth. At the end of the text, they congratulate each other, or (in many cases) only themselves, for being right - and for always having been right.

If the thinking of many would not be so shortened, the few would not have to entangle themselves so in their thinking. Usually, however, no one has asked them to think for others. Theory work, education and reflection are still very important today in order to spin traditions further, to tell stories, to understand oneself as a political subject, to break out of habitual patterns, to analyze power relations, to exercise real criticism of them and to point out alternatives to them. However, the theoretician can only do justice to her/his self-chosen profession if she/he does not work for herself/himself, but - in the sense of the social-revolutionary (anti-)politics described

here - makes education possible for other activists, imparts knowledge, stimulates them to reflect, questions their actions in a solidary-critical way and records their stories.

In search of a new metanarrative as a compass for social-revolutionary (anti-)politics

In the way I have written about the "decay forms" of holistic social-revolutionary (anti-)politics, I have tried to make three things clear:

First, my point in describing them was not to set up an ideal that would have been valid in a fictional past. On the contrary, the contours of social-revolutionary (anti-)politics are to be redefined.This process is in principle never completed and always takes place under certain historical conditions and in specific contexts. Because it cannot be done by a theorist at a desk, I do not want to go into further detail with her description at this point, so as not to impose my own ideas on others. Each group can start with that itself.

Secondly, it was pointed out that the respective forms of decay point to deficits that social-revolutionary (Anti-)political practices often have. Therefore, it is crucial for emancipatory (anti-)politics that self-enjoyment, emotions and experience also play a role in it. Instead of being somehow arbitrary, it starts from one's own settings and internalized attitudes, which can be provocative, but therefore do not necessarily have to become rigid dogmas. Social-revolutionary (anti-)politics starts from its own socialist ethics, which it also wants to generalize with the change of social conditions. This happens through (direct) actions, which can also be good and right, if they are not thought to the last detail. And if they are fed by the need to get out of the inability to act. Finally, social-revolutionary (anti-)political forms can only be produced if they (also) have a corresponding theoretical depth. These tendencies become problematic and decay forms of politics only when they become ends in themselves.

This leads to the third point: enjoyment, conviction, ethics, action and theory belong directly together. In our differentiated society, based on a pronounced division of labor, we are used to people taking on certain tasks. That is also perfectly okay. Not everyone has to do everything or (want to) be able to do everything. Moreover, we should appreciate when people (can) do something with passion that we find good and that helps and advances us in our own activities. The problem is when individuals and especially groups severely neglect some of these aspects. If they even focus entirely on one, there is no bouquet to be won for social-revolutionary (anti-)politics.

Various combinations are conceivable: a theory group can regularly go out partying or be deadly serious - but if it never takes part in actions or is not oriented to any ethics, it is not (anti-)politics. A affinity group that runs from one action to the next, morally condemning others, would do well to have both an ethical and a theoretical reflection on its actions. Those who flaunt and propagate strong convictions will (hopefully) come to understand in the confrontation in political actions that reality is more complex and subsequently perhaps become more open to a more pleasurable (anti-)politics.

Occasionally, I have seen projects, groups and individuals where this mediation and mutual addition has succeeded well. Therefore, the impression should not remain that I have now recognized the problem and can therefore offer others a ready-made concept. That is not the case and I would not want that either. My point was merely to illuminate the difficult conditions of social-

revolutionary (anti-)politics in anti-authoritarian scenes. And to point out that it can lapse and fall short in various ways. This I tried to formulate from my own experiences and the exchange about them. I have not brought concrete examples for this, because I was not interested in attacking specific individuals or groups. Because "we" all have to fight against such tendencies if we want to remain active.

Libertarian Socialism as a Common Denominator of Concrete Utopias

Thus, in order to further develop contemporary social-revolutionary (anti-)politics, it is necessary to keep the various dimensions of political action in mind and to connect them with each other. In my view, this requires the description of shared points of reference, that is, a common narrative of how social conditions can be changed in the sense of libertarian socialism.

Libertarian socialism consists in the reinforcement and networking of social movements that radicalize, relate their respective issues (labor, migration, climate, health, housing, social relations, security, etc.) to each other and relate them to the transformation of society as a whole. For this, the socialization of the means of production, a federalist and horizontal political self-organization, the overcoming of patriarchy and the dismantling of the relationship of domination over nature are sought. Libertarian socialism is guided by the socialist values of social freedom, equality and solidarity, which are lived and realized in practice. For libertarian socialism, anarchism can be a decisive source of inspiration, at least in terms of content, but it is open in principle, to various political currents and social movements. Whether "we" use this name or find another is secondary. The term "libertarian socialism" is used to express the search for a fundamental, emancipatory social alternative. Even if the politics of the anti-authoritarian scence can make an important contribution to this, libertarian socialism goes far beyond it.

By building concrete utopias and developing a social-revolutionary perspective, it succeeds in counteracting the tendencies to flee from strenuous and tense emancipatory (anti-)politics. Conversely, however, it is also true that only with a conscious political practice do "we" gradually achieve successes to which we can orient ourselves.

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