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What Happened to the Anarchist Century?

The timing of this essay is peculiar. It revisits a 2004 article written by Andrej Grubacic and David Graeber, "[Anarchism, or The Revolutionary Movement of the Twenty-First Century](#)." I first conceived of writing it in the summer of 2020. In September that year, David Graeber passed away. As for many, the news came as a shock to me. The essay at hand turned from an attempt to engage two important anarchist authors in discussion to writing a tribute to one of them. I know how much David Graeber enjoyed debating questions he held dear. We first got in touch when I translated his widely read essay "The New Anarchists" into German. The article "Anarchism, or The Revolutionary Movement of the Twenty-First Century," published online by ZNet, expressed the anarchist optimism of the era like few others. Together with "The New Anarchists," it helped inspire an entire activist generation. Grubacic and Graeber ended the article with the contention that "the anarchist century has only just begun." I have been thinking about this promise ever since. Now, twenty years into the twentieth century, it seems worth looking at how much of it still holds true.

The gist of Grubacic and Graeber's argument was that "the global revolutionary movement in the twenty-first century will be one that traces its origins less to the tradition of Marxism, or even of socialism narrowly defined, but of anarchism." Marxist approaches to making the world a better place seemed discredited, while "anarchist ideas and principles [were] generating new radical dreams and visions." According to Grubacic and Graeber, revolutionary method was "less about seizing state power than about exposing, delegitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning ever-larger spaces of autonomy and participatory management within it."

The understanding of revolution as a process that hollows out the state, rather than attacking it, is not characteristic of the anarchist movement per se. The historical figure who represented it most strongly was the German anarchist Gustav Landauer. Landauer suggested

to build an anarchist society on the basis of autonomous communes and cooperatives. To simply attack the state was a lost cause. Landauer is famous for a quote about the state as a “social relationship.” It reads in full: “A table can be overturned and a window can be smashed. However, those who believe that the state is also a thing or a fetish that can be overturned or smashed are sophists and believers in the Word. The state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships; i.e., by people relating to one another differently.”

This is a beautiful idea. But is it feasible? Autonomous communes and cooperatives have come and gone for at least 150 years without substantially threatening the state. As soon as they become too bothersome, they are, in one way or another, integrated – or simply wiped out.

In 2004, Grubacic and Graeber seemed to believe that the “movement of movements” – among whose active participants they counted themselves – would be strong enough to enable revolutionary politics in a Landauerian spirit. The “core principles” that Grubacic and Graeber identified for the movement of movements were “decentralization, voluntary association, mutual aid, the network model, and above all, the rejection of any idea that the end justifies the means, let alone that the business of a revolutionary is to seize state power and then begin imposing one’s vision at the point of a gun.”

One can argue that these core principles are alive and well in social movements. Not only did they characterize Occupy Wall Street (in which David Graeber was an influential figure, albeit certainly no “leader”) as well as numerous similar uprisings in 2011, they are also expressed in current protest movements such as Fridays for Future and Black Lives Matter. Many of today’s activists would agree that, as David Graeber put it in “The New Anarchists,” being politically engaged is “about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy.” Dogmatic leftist currents have all but disappeared. The term “Stalinist” might still be thrown around in sectarian struggles, but real-life Stalinists are few and far between.

The question, of course, is whether these enduring activist principles have brought us closer to a better, or indeed an anarchist, society. Social movements throughout the world continue, and have recently intensified. There has been progress in many countries with regard to the rights of LGBTQ persons, racial and sexual oppression, and economic injustice. However, the overall picture is far from encouraging. Neoliberalism rules supreme; monopoly capitalism is tightening its grip; the gaps between the rich and the poor are increasing; surveillance has surpassed Orwellian levels; fascism is rearing its ugly head; and the world is at the brink of ecological collapse. Social movements demanding radical change are often carried by reactionaries rather than progressives. If the Left has made any progress, it is in the

form of socialist populism, touting the possibility of a social welfare state revival. Anarchy? Hardly.

The understanding of revolution might be central. In “Anarchism, or The Revolutionary Movement of the Twenty-First Century,” Grubacic and Graeber speak of revolution not as “some great apocalyptic moment, the storming of some global equivalent of the Winter Palace,” but as “a very long process that has been going on for most of human history.” That sounds fine, until one wonders whether it really is a meaningful way to speak of revolution. Is it not, rather, a description of “evolution,” whose practical political expression is reformism? This, in and of itself, is no criticism. If it is indeed possible to make progress without apocalyptic moments, we’d be foolish to provoke them. Risking turmoil and bloodshed for no other reason than to satisfy radical self-imagination is revolutionary politics at its worst. But, are we making progress?

Since “Anarchism, or The Revolutionary Movement of the Twenty-First Century” was published, the movement of movements, which Grubacic and Graeber attached their revolutionary hopes to, has undergone some serious criticism by former adherents. J. Moufawad-Paul’s attack on “movementism,” launched in his 2014 book *The Communist Necessity*, serves as a prime example. Moufawad-Paul describes “movementism” as “the assumption that specific social movements, sometimes divided along lines of identity or interest, could reach a critical mass and together, without any of that Leninist nonsense, end capitalism.” In his eyes, the idea that these movements “through some inexplicable mechanism of combination ... produce a revolutionary critical mass, at some point on the distant horizon,” is futile.

As I laid out in a review of *The Communist Necessity* titled “Zapatistas vs. the Shining Path,” I do not agree with the solutions proposed by Moufawad-Paul, who is affiliated with the Maoist Revolutionary Communist Party of Canada. However, his critique of movementism, which he associates with “normative anarchism” (essentially, an uncritical embrace of the principles outlined by Grubacic and Graeber) hits a nerve.

Overall, anarchism’s historical influence has been much greater than often assumed, even by anarchists themselves. From an evolutionary perspective, anarchism has been significant. The eight-hour work day, free speech, abortion rights, antiauthoritarian pedagogy, LGBTQ liberation, antimilitarism, veganism – once upon a time, anarchists were at the forefront of all these struggles. But the changes they helped instigate have mostly come as reforms within the capitalist nation state. Anarchism had times when it impacted society at large, but they all came in the context of war, and none lasted for more than a couple of years. While anarchism’s reformist legacy is strong, its revolutionary legacy is weak.

Anarchists like to blame the ruthlessness of capitalists and their cronies for their failures – or the backstabbing of Marxists. There is truth in both, but it is not a sufficient explanation for anarchism’s poor revolutionary record. An important factor is that anarchists – for noble

reasons – refuse to take on a role that revolutionary events often require. In an 1872 article, Friedrich Engels wrote about his anarchist contemporaries: “Have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution? A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is an act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon, all of which are highly authoritarian means.”

An anarchist cannot subscribe to such a notion of revolution without ceasing to be an anarchist. But neither can an anarchist drain the notion of revolution of all revolutionary content without ceasing to be a revolutionary. If anarchists want to be revolutionaries, they need to present models of revolution that differ from the Leninist one but are more substantial than the hope for some kind of historical magic. (I elaborate on this in the essay “Revolution Is More Than a Word: 23 Theses on Anarchism.”)

I don’t think that revolutions need to be “apocalyptic moments.” But neither do I think that a radical transformation of society can come without significant ruptures. These will not grant us justice and freedom overnight, but they can drastically change the political arena and open windows of opportunity.

It is curious that anarchists, including many from the movement-of-movements generation, have in the past decade followed the developments in Kurdistan with great excitement. The Kurdish liberation movement is no longer fighting for an independent nation state but for “democratic confederalism.” Much has been made of the influence by Murray Bookchin on Abdullah Öcalan, the council system, and the critique of patriarchy. Yet, the Kurdish liberation movement sticks to ideas that “movementist” anarchists thought they could do without: parties, cadres, strategy, and grand theory. I don’t think that this is a coincidence.

Are we really living in the anarchist century? I’m not sure. The impact that antiauthoritarian ideas have had on social movements has been far from negative. It has made social movements more diverse and creative, facilitated the challenging of internal power structures, and highlighted the importance of self-empowerment. Yet, there are reasons why many political actors who embrace these elements do not embrace anarchism. The reasons can be cultural or ideological. I’m sure that plenty of academic arguments could be made for why the politics of these actors could still be called anarchist, but it’s a rather pointless exercise. Analytical categorization might have its place, but it is politically irrelevant. The political strength of a term comes from its application. No appliers, no strength.

Self-identified anarchists and anarchist organizations remain important. Anarchist ideas must be maintained, nurtured, and sharpened. Revolutionary movements and societies beyond the state and capital will benefit from them.

Anarchists will in all likelihood not lead a revolution in the near future – or ever, considering the paradox implicit in the idea itself. But, as reliable and dedicated companions to other progressive revolutionaries, they can play a crucial part. The twenty-first century still offers us eighty years. That’s plenty of time to make things better – anarchist or not.

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