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What are we fighting for? Ideological posturing and anarchist geographies

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Abstract

Recent debates in radical geography seem determined to be oppositional and in so doing simplify what is at stake. We need to celebrate and maintain the openness of geography to multiple perspectives while simultaneously developing more action-orientated, hopeful ways forward. Anarchist perspectives hold plenty of promise for radical geography, but only if we critically interrogate its principles and empirics.

Key words

Radical geography, Anarchism, Marxism, hope, politics

If I were asked to identify an ideology that made most sense to me it would be anarchism. Anarchist and autonomist politics have driven much of my research and imbued my life choices. They frame the starting points of my research questions (what does grassroots change achieve?) and my daily practices, yet long ago I also learnt to embrace the impossibilities of being an 'anarchist'. Not only are there numerous and contested ways in which to understand anarchism (primitivists, anarcho-syndicalists etc), but so too will practical efforts always fall in between the capitalist present and the hoped-for future. Despite trying to live prefiguratively, I live in an interstitial space where my beliefs and ideals constantly clash with the University, a Conservative government, and my own family. I decided long ago to remain engaged in this capitalist life while many of my friends took another path – to live as closely by their beliefs as possible and abandon capitalism, fossil fuels, supermarkets, laws and state education.

What interested me most were precisely those tensions where it seemed impossible to be an anarchist in current society. These are not points of failure but rather crucial moments of learning and experimentation. These clashes between anarchist practices and capitalist hegemony, and therefore the apparent impossibilities of being anarchist, or anarchism as being a viable alternative ideology, are precisely the spaces of impossibility that need further work. In other words, we have to identify these moments and then creatively explore, critique and navigate them. It is this focus on practices, on daily life and its contradictions, and the impossibility of living an ideology, where anarchism holds most promise.

It might seem rather disingenuous to start this response to Harvey (2015) and Springer (2014) by pointing out the impossibility of anarchism while simultaneously asserting I am an 'anarchist', but it is born of a frustration with recent debates in radical geography that seem determined to be oppositional and in so doing simplify what is at stake. This

is exemplified in a defensive posting to the Critical Geography email forum in April this year by Raju Das who felt “there is an urgent need to defend the space for Marxist geographical knowledge, one that places class geography at the center ... within a dialectical-totalizing logic of accumulation” (2015), but also by the deliberately provocative tone of Springer’s intervention. The discipline of Geography that I know and love is open and accommodating to a myriad of ways of understanding the world. It incorporates feminism, post-colonialism, environmentalism, to name just a few, alongside Marxism and Anarchism. Indeed it is this openness that I consider its strength: it enables us to creatively explore different knowledges, perspectives and languages (theoretical and linguistic). There is still so much more work to be done in harnessing this openness, especially to ideas beyond the global north, that to be posturing as to which –ism best explains the world, and to get bogged down in dogma, is to miss the point and to diminish the potential of Geography. Such posturing also hides numerous assumptions as to who gets to define *which* Marxism and *which* Anarchism is deemed appropriate, written by whom, for what audience, and therefore whose voices are marginalised in the process. For example, I cannot disentangle my feminism from my engagement with anarchism, and thus I am far more interested in the work and life of Emma Goldman (1969) than Proudhon, even if he was a geographer.

As geographers we should also be more attuned to discussing the spaces in which these tensions between Marxism and Anarchism are occurring. I recognise some of Springer’s descriptions from hostile encounters with Marxists in street politics and on-the-ground campaigning, but not from academic geographers. I have often drawn upon Harvey’s work, regardless of his Marxism, and enjoyed the space that early radical geographers created for future generations in the discipline. This is not to say that we should offer unquestioning thanks to those who pushed open the door, but we do now have a responsibility to keep that door open. There are numerous threats to academic geography, particularly radical geography (academic culture shifting to a focus on grant income, the rise of casual employment contracts, gender and ethnic inequalities, privileged consumer-orientated students and increasing workloads). Although such threats have benefited from Marxist (Smith, 2000; Castree, 2000) and Anarchist (Chatterton and Featherstone, 2006; Mason *et al.*, 2013) analyses, there remains too little discussion of solutions, alternatives and forms of resistance within the academy (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). It is not so much that a radical geography must be anarchist (or Marxist), but that it should still exist at all in 25 years time (Pickerill, 2015).

Which leads to the point of using any ideology at all; what does it allow us to understand about the world *and* therefore to do to make the world a better place? As Harvey and Springer agree, Marxism has enabled a thorough and robust understanding of capital circulations and accumulations. As Harvey argues, Marxists “define more clearly what the struggle has to be about and against and why” (2015, p.*). What Marxists are less good at is in identifying what we should be for, and how to get there. If we can concede that we understand much of why the world is as it is, then what geography needs is less an historical perspective and more a future-orientated, hopeful approach. Of course understanding ways forward is intimately tied into knowledges about the past, but I still find too much geographical scholarship pointing out what is wrong with the world and how it became that way, with little attention paid to what we can do about it. A “more openly political geography” (Harvey, 2015, p.*) needs to be

more normative, more action-orientated, and bolder in its suggestion of ways forward. My reading of Springer is, in part, a call for a more assertive geography of action.

Is Anarchism, then, any use in building this forward-facing geography of action? Harvey concedes that anarchism is good at focusing on everyday life and value realisation, though these are not entirely absent in Marxism either. Yet Harvey rightly raises five issues with anarchism that are worth exploring a little further here: a lack of totalizing theory; forms of social organisation; opposition to the state; scale; and infrastructures.

Harvey asserts that Anarchists have no theory of society; they have no totalizing theory (in the way that Marxism does) and are thus unable to conceive of how society would function, how Anarchism can stop capitalism, nor what this society would look like. This is interpreted as theoretically incoherent, naive, and contradictory. In essence Anarchism can be considered as placing too much emphasis on a politics of refusal (what we are against), rather than having an adequate plan for how the future might look. Unfortunately Springer's example of the myriad ways in which people might be engaged daily in anarchist principles (such as "looked after your brother's kids" 2014, 265) does not counter this criticism. Arguing that banal mundane activities are inherently political might illustrate the importance of everyday social practices, but not that Anarchism adds up to a coherent theory.

Anarchism, for me, is about practices far more than theory. It is one thing as an individual to argue that our daily lived practices are important political acts and/or moments of resistance, but as academics we need to be examining and critiquing what these practices mean *collectively*. In other words, it is unlikely that anything changes in society if I alone walk down a road, but if 100 people collectively walk down the road then traffic will be stopped, people inconvenienced, and laws broken. Anarchism really only works if others are being anarchist alongside you; it is an inherently collective endeavour which is misunderstood by its label as being first and foremost about personal autonomy. Indeed autonomous spaces are "where there is a desire to constitute non-capitalist, collective forms of politics, identity and citizenship which are created through a combination of resistance and creation, and questioning and challenging dominant laws and social norms" (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006, 1). Anarchism is about collective practices and we need to do empirical work on what these collective practices constitute.

In terms of the lack of a plan, it is precisely the openness of Anarchism that I find exciting. It creates a space for me, and others, to actively dream, create and build whatever future we want. This allows a huge space for creativity, experimentation, and freedom. It might appear to some that a lack of a plan represents an absence of vision, but far from it, there are numerous anarchist 'blueprints'. It perhaps depends in what sense you are searching for meaning in life. I have never wanted someone to tell me what that meaning was, or to predetermine that it was fundamentally around class. Rather I have wanted to collectively experiment with others to discover what common ground we shared, and to work through all the tensions that arise through the process. This is a messier, looser, riskier process than some would like, but it is also a rare space in which I can express the intersectionality of who I am and have my own unique voice.

The practicalities of working together are, of course, far from perfect. While organisational form might be a central tenet of anarchist philosophy and practice, there is still plenty of work to be done. Harvey is right to raise questions as to the value of horizontalism and decentralisation: many anarchists have raised these questions too.

Given that Anarchism is *not* about total individual freedom (rather freedom *from* hierarchical societal oppression exerted by the state, corporates and others), anarchists must work out ways to co-exist with each other. Depending on one's definition of Anarchism this can variously involve ensuring your actions do not cause others harm, to ensuring you only consume your fair share of the earth's resources. Anarchism in this perspective is about freedom from oppression, while ensuring that one person's freedom should not curtail another's.

Like Harvey I have experienced my fair share of consensus horizontality that has worked and plenty that has not. Unstructured group decision making processes can be easily corrupted by practices of exclusion: poor listening skills, dominant voices and a silenced majority. As Freeman argued long ago, there is a tyranny of structurelessness (1973) just as Polletta (2004) argued that freedom can become an endless meeting. That is why anarchist organising is far from unstructured. In order to enable non-hierarchical organisational forms there are numerous practices and ethics put in place, often managed by the facilitator. Common codes of conduct are shared, practised and improved, and an ethics of care is increasingly visible in such organisational forms as moments to check whether all present are content with discussions thus far. Anarchist organisational forms should not be confused with the very different concept of personal autonomy. Organisational forms illustrate the collectivity of anarchism. This is not to say that disagreements do not arise, or that groups do not split, but that significant time and experimentation has gone into developing anarchist organisational forms, and they will continue to evolve. In this, then, I agree with Bookchin (2014) that we should not fetishize any particular model of organisation, but instead constantly seek to improve them.

This constant evolution stands in contrast to the claim that anarchists like to draw upon indigenous communities as exemplar organisational forms. I associate such approaches with primitivist anarchists who naïvely romanticise indigenous life. While I argue for the need to respect indigenous knowledges, seeking to replicate indigenous organisational forms traps them in the past, and fails to acknowledge their dynamism, their complexities and the challenges they are facing (Barker and Pickerill, 2012).

Harvey also notes that the importance of leadership is beginning to be recognised, as if this is a critique of anarchism. Leadership need not be hierarchical; indeed it is often more effective if it is not and even if consensus is being practised there will always be people who others wish to follow. Rather it is about enabling leadership to be organic and having checks against power. Finally on organisational form, are the dangers of decentralisation that Harvey identifies and criticises Gibson-Graham (2006), rightly identifying the potential of greater inequality, or as in the case of flexible specialization, co-option by capitalism. I do not deny these dangers, nor Harvey's example of Piore and Sabel's misjudgement, but part of what constitutes these decentralised organisational forms is missing from this narrative. Decentralisation in the anarchist approach does not mean a collection of unconnected small producers, each vulnerable to both state and capitalist appropriation. They are instead connected through networks and geographies of solidarity; however distant, they share ideas and resources, and support each other. These networks are not indestructible, but they are strengthened by common values and are drawn upon when needed: by connecting (even virtually), they create the mutual space for all to survive.

The issue of organisational form further raises questions about anarchists' relation to the state and the scale at which anarchists operate. It would be hard to deny that anarchists tend to have disdain for the state, and often seek its destruction. The state is very effective at co-opting oppositional elements, absorbing people's energy and power, and in homogenising ideas. We do not need to look much further than the British electoral system to see some of these tendencies. However, I also recognise the argument, articulated by Harvey, that too often anarchists ignore the state (allowing it to flourish) and consider the state a monolith. In many ways the state is an unresolved entity in anarchism. There are clear difficulties with the logic that small-scale anarchist alternatives will gain enough momentum to out-compete a state, or alternatively that the state will ultimately tolerate a growing population subverting it. Likewise there is little anarchist discussion of what actually constitutes the state – whether it is the parliamentary systems and the military and police, or, for example, also includes health, education, and publically-funded news services. My experience is that anarchists seek to disregard the state and the questions this raises (which is problematic), but not that they create state-like structures. To argue such is again to misrepresent the organisational forms being developed and practised by anarchists, and to confuse attempts at direct democracy with democracy as it is experienced by many of us now.

A fourth concern that Harvey raises about anarchism is its understanding and treatment of scale. The anarchist' focus on everyday practice and a rejection of a totalizing theory of society is at the expense of a thorough consideration of scalar changes, or rather anarchists treat scale in a very different way to Marxists, who tend to focus on much broader scales of labour processes and capital accumulations. While it is possible to critique anarchists for investing too much in the possibilities of the politics of daily life, they do at least identify actions available to everyone. There is no need to wait, in anarchist thought, until somebody else has enacted change elsewhere. Neither is anarchism reliant on securing global level agreements. While this lack of articulation of how global issues might be solved at an international scale might be considered a weakness, it also looks increasingly realistic. We are not making significant progress in tackling climate change.

Harvey's final concern considered here is around infrastructures, in essence that anarchists have not adequately considered how infrastructures would be maintained. The varied infrastructures that enable contemporary living in places like Britain are all too often invisible. Yet there has already been considerable work, by anarchists and others, in experimenting with developing alternative infrastructures – material and social. For example, in my work on self-build off-grid eco-housing there are many who have developed, built and successfully operate their own power generation, sewerage systems, and also education and health services (Pickerill, 2016). There are plenty of examples of anarchists proactively experimenting with building their own new infrastructures. Perhaps ironically, however, these are just not very visible.

What are we fighting for? While there is intellectual merit in debating ideological differences, it is a peculiar academic trait to argue over how a particular sub-discipline should operate. Of course the central question remains: how can we stop the hegemony of capital and capitalism. At least, in many ways, Marxists and Anarchists can agree what is wrong with the world. Beyond that, as Harvey argues, we should be focusing on how to “open up a space for a different kind of politics and a different conversation”

(Harvey, 2015, p.*), or rather different *kinds* of politics and *conversations*. We need a plurality of potential answers. While we might need a contentious politics in order to disrupt capitalism and all its associated hegemonies, I am less convinced that we need to spend our energies being contentious within the discipline of Geography. It reminds me of those academics who choose to rally against internal department governance, rather than focus their energies on something that might actually matter. We need less ideological posturing and instead more empirical analysis. Geography should be about creating the space to experiment in radical alternatives, *and* then, and this is the crucial element, to critically analyse those experiments. We should be spending our time using our intellectual resources, and funding, to do the hard empirical work of taking action, practically testing ideas and critically scrutinising what works in stopping capitalism and what works less well.

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