

Interconnections between anarchist practices and grassroots struggles¹

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Introduction

Since the early 21st century, protests in Argentina led by the slogan ‘*Que se vayan todos*’ [‘They all must go’] have opened the door to a new cycle of mobilizations, both in Latin America and other places around the world (Holloway, 2010). These were led by social subjects (such as peasants or indigenous communities, homeless, *villeros*, rural students, *chavos banda*, unemployed, *cartoneros*, and housewives)² who were invisible in the analyses and definitions of collective action traditionally centred on the institutional and structural dimension of protest, calling what is ‘politics’ and ‘social’ into question (Zibechi, 2007).

Moreover, as John Holloway said, social change is “the outcome of the barely visible transformation of the daily activities of millions of people. We must look beyond activism, then, to the millions and millions of refusals and other-doings, the millions and millions of cracks that constitute the material base of possible radical change” (2010, p. 12). Recently, increasing attention to the cultural and subjective dimensions of social movements has raised the academic and political visibility of those grassroots groups characterized by self-managed and horizontal organization and projects, where anti-authoritative discourses and practices of anarchism can be observed.

Even though many social movement scholars are only just discovering the ordinary people’s struggles - or “nonmovement”, as Asef Bayat (2010) defined them, based on his experience in the Middle East - this interconnection between anarchism and grassroots protest is not new. In fact, following Malatesta’s words “Let’s go to the people”, an historical Mexican anarcho-punk told me: “we were always present in the social struggles, from the earthquake of Mexico City in 1985, the anarcho-punks were there, rescuing people, opening wells, etc., in the protests of teachers (1990s), in Atenco resistance (2006), in Oaxaca insurgency (2006), the anarcho-punks were always present”³. As for the anarchist subjects who make themselves present in many

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² *Villeros* are people that live in suburbs of Latin-American, big cities like Buenos Aires, or Santiago del Chile. *Chavos banda* are very young people, generally from rural and poor villages, who live like beggars in the urban areas such as Oaxaca, Mexico City, Guadalajara. *Cartoneros* are people who make their living collecting and selling salvaged materials to recycling plants. This movement began in Argentina in 2003 and has since spread to countries throughout Latin America. Most of these people live under the shadow of informal economy; they do not exist, nor are they represented by the ruling class (Zibechi, 2010).

³ Interview on June 2013, Mexico City (Mexico).

of these protests, whether local or national, they have always valued the space of daily practice as a focus for struggle and social change. However, it is only in the last twenty years that this interconnection has become more evident in academic circles. In my experience this is due to three main reasons:

- a. First of all, there seems to be more participants from grassroots movements and anarchist collectives in academia⁴, such as the *Bloque Libertario*, anarchist UNAM's student group in Mexico, or the students and researchers of Libertarian Youth (*Juventudes Libertarias*) in several Spanish universities. These researchers can offer a different focus in the study of social movements: one that is characterized by a "look from inside", as discussed by Gould (2009).
- b. Secondly, the power and legitimacy of some state-centred left actors (such as unions and parties), which have tended to monopolize ways of protesting for decades, have decreased (Holloway, 2002). As John Holloway wrote, "there is one key concept in the history of the state-centred left, and that concept is betrayal. Time and time again, the leaders have betrayed the movement, and not necessarily because they are bad people, but just because the state as a form of organisation separate the leaders from the movement and draws them into a process of reconciliation with capital" (2006, p. 46). This "betrayal" could be observed in Europe in the last few decades, where these political actors are no longer the moral reference point for ordinary people, nor for those who pursue social change; and their declining legitimacy has allowed other actors, with other practices, to emerge.
- c. Finally, as several NGOs, professional consultants and researchers have played an important role in co-opting activists (Foweraker, 2001; González, 2007), mediating in social conflicts for both governmental and lobbies' interests (Aguirre and Matthews, 1989; Bermúdez, 1987; López y Rivas, 2012;), and in creating division among protestors (Zibechi, 2010), grassroots movements and anarchists have found more common ground.

To summarize, a loss of power and legitimacy among these actors has highlighted the existence of self-organized people, anarchists, and their connections. In order to understand the role of anarchists in these current grassroots movements, I will answer these key questions:

1. What elements and practices are shared between grassroots movements and anarchists?
2. How and why are anarchists important to grassroots protests?
3. How and why are grassroots groups important to anarchists?

My analysis is based on:

⁴ This is possible in a number of European countries such as Spain, Italy, Greece, and several Latin American countries, such as Mexico or Argentina, where there still exists a public high school system with low university fees.

- My personal experience as an anarchist militant in several anarchist collectives and projects for twenty years, including those in Italy (Anarchist Occupy Social Space *Libera*, Italian anarcho-syndicalist trade union *Unione Sindacale Italiana*); Spain (Spanish anarcho-syndicalist trade union *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*); Mexico (Social Space *Ruptura*, Zapatista support groups); the UK (Solidarity Federation), and International Workers Association's delegate (IWA).
- My personal knowledge of different anarchist networks.
- My fieldwork on social conflicts and grassroots movements, including qualitative techniques such as in-depth interviews, focus groups and life histories.

1. What elements and practices are shared between grassroots movements and anarchists?

Empathizing with victims of social injustice is one of the most important bonds between grassroots groups and anarchist subjects. These days in Mexico, for instance, “*Su dolor es nuestro dolor, su rabia es nuestra rabia*” [Their grief is our grief, their anger is our anger] is the motto that several anarchist groups are sharing with grassroots protests against the murder of six, and the disappearance of 43, rural students in Guerrero, Mexico, which occurred in late September 2014. Emotions, which have an important role in protest as the literature over the past twenty years suggests (Jasper, 1997, 1998, 2006 and 2011; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2000, 2001 and 2004; Flam and King, 2005; Gould, 2009), are one of the principal bonds between these two subjects. In particular, grief, anger or indignation, are emotions that result from empathizing with the ones who suffer. This process of empathizing is integral to participation and involvement in protest, and it can help to explain why people support groups and movements despite possible risks - not for material gain, but rather for intrinsic moral and emotional reasons, as the NoTAV movement shows.

Although left-wing parties and unions in Italy support the High Speed Rail Project in Turin –known as TAV – and “sell” it as a tool to improve employment and benefit national interest, local inhabitants are wholly disappointed with this project and, for more than twenty years, they have been struggling against it. The NoTAV movement has developed a struggle based on an injustice frame and emotional links such as place attachment and solidarity. Anarchists are taking part in this movement because they have recognized these emotional links as an essential set of values that are worth fighting for. Although the left-wing parties, unions, and many Italian intellectuals and scholars, endorse the project and legitimate the military government repression, the NoTAV movement has become an icon for grassroots protests both in Italy and Europe. After twenty years, it is less important whether benefits by the project are actually true or whether an alternative project is possible, since the protest against the High Speed Rail Project has been turned

into a struggle for people's self-respect and own dignity.

Another shared feature is that, in both grassroots groups and anarchist collectives, the political discourses are carried into everyday life practices - that is, their everyday needs lead their collective actions. For example, in Mexico, not only do anarcho-punk collectives and people from popular and poor barrios –which are excluded from all sorts of equipment in terms of education, culture, and health, among others— protest together against governmental policies of exclusion, but they are also setting up alternative social projects like co-operatives of self-managed work, soup kitchens, alternative farmer markets, and so forth, in order to satisfy their daily needs.

Grassroots groups share with anarchists the importance of starting their struggles and resistances from their own local territory. Recently, global protests against international organizations such as the WTO, IMF or G8 have lost some credibility, as local struggles have arguably become more salient on the grassroots agenda, and the time and place of the protest are less frequently dictated by professional activists from the World Social Forum, SMOs, NGOs or left-wing parties nor unions.

Grassroots groups and anarchist collectives also have some common self-management practices – for example, in how they tend to make a living. Often self-reliant, they fund their struggles from selling items such as T-shirts, stickers and food. The Do It Yourself practice is the core of both grassroots groups and anarchists. Nonetheless, the DIY practice does not only involve an individual dimension as a specific dexterity or skill, but also collective abilities and needs where “you” becomes a “we” turning the DIY into Do It Together. Therefore, the Do It Together practice permits not only independence from parties, unions, or NGOs, but also developing another important process that is learning by doing.

2. How and why are anarchists important to grassroots protests?

In my experience, anarchist practices and projects represent an alternative to the hegemonic system. These innumerable experiences around the world set a precedent for collective imagination. In the city of Modena, which has consistently been governed since 1945 by authoritarian left-wing coalitions, anarchists have occupied the social space *Libera*, which was set up in 2000, before they were evicted in 2008. This experience showed that developing other kinds of social policies and relationships beyond the co-opting and repressive policies of the Communist Party is possible. Now in Modena, different autonomous social experiences have sprouted up as a result of the *Libera* experience. Paraphrasing Bakunin (1871), anarchist collectives show ordinary people that the impossible is possible.

Anarchist subjects have also pointed out the importance of individuality as a noun and not the individual as an adjective. As Goodwin et al. (2001: 3) note:

“Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and their successors portrayed revolutionaries as rationally pursuing their material interests”. Furthermore, Marxist scholars have rejected individuality as one of the main aspects for social change in order to regulate social injustices and increase public loyalty through creating the illusion of participatory politics while simultaneously preserving the interests of the State. Individual behaviours, biographical experiences, and emotions have often been eradicated from protest associated with several state-centred left actors, in favour of pursuing their own political goals, discouraging people from developing their own creativity, critical senses, and experiencing the pleasure of being in disagreement. Conversely, from an anarchist’s point of view - following Bakunin (1911) - the infinite diversity of people is the principal basis of their solidarity, evident between Mexican anarcho-punks and Zapatista communities, for instance. Anarchists have always emphasized the moral worth of the individual, and the importance of differences between each person, because this diversity draws people into a collective whole in which each person completes the whole while the others complete her.

Lastly, what I have observed in my experience and fieldwork is that anarchists play a central role in preventing the concentration of power when grassroots groups self-organize. Anarchist individuals or collectives are like an alarm bell, which ring every time someone tries to break the horizontal decisional process of the assembly or co-opt the most active participants – as is often the case when there is someone linked to a union, party, or other potentially co-opting cause, for example. This occurred in Spain where anarchists played an important role in 15M’s assemblies.

3. How and why are grassroots groups important to anarchists?

In spite of the fact that anarchist subjects constitute an important gear in grassroots movements’ machinery, the influence grassroots movements have had on anarchist collectives is arguably the most important. Indeed, in my experience, self-managed protests by ordinary people in many countries have been a breath of fresh air for local anarchist movements. The insurrection of indigenous communities in Chiapas in 1994, with the uprising of the National Liberation Zapatista Army (EZLN), is undoubtedly one of the most significant influences on protagonists of the Mexican anarcho-punk movement. Anarcho-punk collectives expand on concepts such as autonomy, *comunidad* [community] and *comunalidad* [communality]⁵, etc. with the very same act of solidarity towards the Zapatista communities. As an anarcho-punk activist from Guadalajara told me: “many of our fanzines were based on the issue of autonomy and the municipalities, of Caracoles, of living in indigenous communities, etc. I mean, the movement has been fuelled by this [Zapatista

⁵ The elements of *comunalidad* [community] and *comunalidad* [communality] are described by Mexican *Mixe* indigenous anthropologist Floriberto Díaz Gómez (2004).

insurrection] a lot”⁶.

In the same way, environmental grassroots protests such as NoTAV in Turin and the NoMOUS movement in Sicily against the construction of the ground station developed by the United States Department of Defense, have been a milestone in the growth of anarchist collectives in Italy. In these kinds of protests carried out by ordinary people, the loss of legitimacy of institutional politics clears the way for anti-authoritative practices and values that build a bridge between grassroots movements and anarchists.

“People change themselves, changing the world”

The relationship between anarchist collectives and grassroots protests, which are characterized by self-managed and horizontal organization and direct action, is not new. Anarchists have played an important role in movements, protests and riots all over the world, such as the *Settimana Rossa* [Red Week] in Italy in 1914; the large rural strike in Patagonia (Argentina) in 1920/21; the Zapatista Mexican Revolution in 1910; the protests against Nuclear power in Europe in 70s and 80s, and more recently in educational spaces, neighbourhood libraries, soup kitchens, health care and housing support projects, and so on. Nevertheless, only recently has this relationship has gained academic and political⁷ visibility, due to the loss of power and legitimacy of several ‘traditional’ political and social state-centred left actors.

Several elements characterize this relationship. Perhaps the most important is collective emotions (Jasper, 2011). These grassroots conflicts are characterized by collective experiences, which create ties that can motivate participation. Moreover, the emotional dimension strengthens the reasons to continue being involved in the conflict - far beyond any material interests and cost-benefit evaluations, in favour of alternative moral values and other elements that affirm dignity, identity, place attachment, and so on.

The relationship between grassroots groups and anarchists is producing “another” form of doing politics, characterized by carrying political practices into everyday life practices. People who have participated in these self-organized protests, redefine their way of doing politics and seeing the world. For instance, they no longer legitimise the practice of delegating, but instead they start developing new political practices based on anti-authoritarian and horizontal values. As a woman, who took part in the Oaxaca insurgency in 2006, told me: “that’s how we are creating a community and other sorts of relationship, and I think that’s the best ever, the ways to relate to each other and be together”⁸. But above all, these experiences are affirming *hic et nuc*,

⁶ Interview on June 2013, Guadalajara City (Mexico).

⁷ State repression of anarchist activists and groups all over the world perhaps suggests that governments noticed this relationship before researchers.

⁸ Interview on December 2010, Oaxaca (Mexico).

here and now⁹, and their means of *prefigurative politics* reflect, or are somehow equivalent to the ends (Boggs, 1977a and 1977b). In other words, following Rucht (1988), Epstein (1991) or Franks (2003) among others, in the grassroots movements the ‘means reflect the ends’, and its organization and practices in some way anticipate or enact an ‘alternative world’ in the present, as it has already been achieved.

Finally, in my experience, the relationship between grassroots movements and anarchists is based on trust, respect, solidarity and mutual aid - elements which played, as Kropotkin claimed, a large part in the development and evolution of human beings. This kind of relationship is possible because anarchists want people to empower themselves, and not to join their anarchist collectives or become anarchists – in contrast to how parties, unions, and NGOs tend to operate.

To conclude, grassroots movements and anarchists are setting up a laboratory for political experimentation, where a process of social change is no longer hidden. This social change is possible when people empower themselves through a process of emancipation that cannot be fast and rushed, but is slow, constant, and gradually spreading. A process in which the protagonists of these experiences “change themselves, changing the world” (Zibechi, 2007, p. 15). As a Spanish 15Ms protestor told me: “you only have to change your awareness, this is where the change happens. You must not expect someone else’s to change, but you must demand a change in yourselves, your mentality has to change”¹⁰.

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⁹ While several other struggles have been characterized by religious and political doctrines, such as Catholicism and Marxism, which suggest that a better life is achievable only in a far away future.

¹⁰ Interview on October 2012, Seville (Spain).

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