

# Power Relations in Grassroots Organising: An Anarchist Dialectics

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## ABSTRACT

This paper conceptualises power as a radical open-ended dialectic of political and anti-political moments. Drawing on anarchist, intersectional feminist, Black radical, critical, and Christian personalist theory, I explore an anarchist dialectics that accounts for both the dichotomy and the mutually constitutive relationship between politics and anti-politics, sustaining creative tensions between the two. Based on this framework, I argue that tensions between different traditions, groups and tactics in grassroots movements are rooted in differences of power. These tensions can only be reconciled through reciprocal collaboration between groups and people across differences of power. I explore coalitions and diversity of tactics as ways of organising that can reconcile and radically transform power relations.

**Keywords:** *dialectics, grassroots coalition, power*

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## INTRODUCTION

The paradoxical question motivating this article is how grassroots groups can organise for power while radically challenging power. How can groups build effective political resistance to domination without reproducing relationships of domination within their group and networks? How do we reconcile an abolitionist politics with the building of alternative systems, such as migrant advice centres and night shelters? How do we demand rights while also challenging the exclusionary presumptions contained in the notion of rights?

With ‘grassroots organising’ I mean decentralised and overlapping networks of self-organised groups where people work to meet each other’s needs and challenge injustices. These networks include anarchist groups and many of the principles

and tactics that are widely used in grassroots movements, such as direct action, horizontal structures, and self-determination, have roots in the anarchist tradition (Graeber 2007; Gordon 2007; Newman 2010b). I therefore think of grassroots organising as the wider context within which anarchist theory is generated and put into practice.

Grassroots organising sustains creative tensions between different traditions and tactics. For example, Natasha King describes a 'fundamental tension' in European anti-border movements between groups that make demands on the state and groups that seek autonomy from the state (King 2016, p50). Chris Rossdale describes tensions between groups committed to principles of non-violence and groups who reject such a commitment (Rossdale 2019). Another example is the debate between formally structured and structureless organising which remains 'critically important' in feminist and anarchist movements (AK Press Collective 2012, p7).

Rather than treating these issues as conflicts between entirely different strategies or perspectives, I view these as creative tensions rooted in the contradictory nature of power. I read these various debates as creative tensions between the contradictory aims of building power, and abolishing power; between the aims of enabling concerted action and enabling radically new ways of being. I conceptualise the aim to abolish power as an anti-political moment in grassroots organising. I conceptualise the aim to build power as a political moment.

The political moment is where relationships between people, ideas, and objects become fixed structurally, for example, in the form of ideology and both formal and informal organising structures. These structures impose order into human relationships, and thereby enable collective action. I will argue that the political moment is an important and necessary moment in grassroots organising that must not be taken for granted. Instead, political structures must be recognised as contingent and changeable (Robinson 1980, p218). And because the political is not coherent or consistent, it also implies an anti-political moment.

The anti-political moment is where the structures imposed by the political are dissolved, creating space for radically new relationships. I would describe abolition, non-violence, and 'structurelessness' as anti-political impulses. These perspectives negate specific political structures such as the state, militarism, and organisational hierarchies while affirming the possibility of doing things differently. However, these perspectives cannot be implemented or even articulated without the structures of organisation and language. The anti-political moment therefore also entails a political moment.

The political and anti-political moments are thus deeply intertwined, and one cannot be thought without the other. However, I will argue that there is an antagonism between the two moments that is the basis of power relations. This antagonism between the political and anti-political can only be reconciled dynamically, unevenly, and inconsistently within grassroots organising. By denying this antagonism or superficially stating its reconciliation, we render invisible the power struggles that make reconciliation possible.

The central argument advanced in this paper is that the tensions between different strategies, tactics, and traditions in grassroots organising are rooted in the dialectical nature of power. I aim to explore an anarchist dialectics that is not Eurocentric, linear, or deterministic. This would be a 'radicalized' (Ciccariello-Maher 2017, p10) and 'open' (Adorno 2017, p21) dialectics where the two poles of the dialectic are not mediated (Sagriotis 2012, p4). The relationship between political and anti-political moments is neither a closed internal contradiction nor an indifferent external relation. Their relationship is one of dynamic opposition, rupture, and uncertainty, in which universal reconciliation is 'infinitely deferred' (Ciccariello-Maher 2017, p50).

The necessity of, and tools for, sustaining the tensions between contradictory tactics have been learned through engagement between different groups and traditions within grassroots movements. For example, Black anarchists advocate the need to take money from the state and defend democratic rights while also rejecting absolutely the legitimacy of the state (Kom'boa Ervin 1993, pp11, 21). Queer and feminist anarchists defend the struggle for 'meaningful reform' such as suffrage, equal pay and trans rights, while maintaining that the endpoint is abolition of government (RAG Dublin 2012, p14). The Christian anarchist Catholic Worker movement aims to implement a radical form of hospitality that reconciles charity with political resistance (Newman 2015, p2).

This paper therefore draws on anarchist theorists as well as intersectional feminist thought which is a key influence on anarchafeminist and anarchaqueer theory (Jeppesen and Nazar 2012, p170), and Black radical and decolonial theory which has been 'central in shaping anarchism' (Evren 2012, p306). This paper also refers to the Christian personalist pedagogy of Emmanuel Mounier, who has been influential for Christian anarchists and the Catholic Worker movement in particular (Pauli 2017, p30).

Furthermore, this paper reflects on my personal experience of organising in anarchist, anti-militarist, and anti-border movements. I am an anarchist organiser, activist, lay researcher, and writer. Power relations in grassroots groups are the

objects of this paper because I seek to understand and contribute creative ideas for how to engage with the contradictions I experience in my organising work. Grassroots organising is therefore not only the object of study but also the perspective from which I engage in the question of power, with the hope of using my research as a tool for resistance (Dadusc 2014). This paper is therefore both a theoretical intervention into grassroots organising and an intervention into anarchist theory from the perspective of anarchist practice.

The first section of this paper conceptualises power relations as dialectic between objective and subjective power. This allows me to express ways in which power can be vulnerable and how vulnerability itself can be productive and, in its own way, powerful. The aim is not to define two kinds of power but to articulate a dynamic that, I argue, is the source of both collective power and domination. Power relations dynamically unify subjective and objective power, enabling transformative collective action. However, power relations can also become polarised.

The second section recasts political moments in organising as moments of objective empowerment, and anti-political moments as moments of subjective empowerment. I look to coalitions and diversity of tactics as ways of reconciling the tensions between political and anti-political moments. Coalitions enable collective action based on a diversity of tactics that in turn destabilises the coalition itself. I draw on the UK-based Stop the Arms Fair (STAF) coalition as an example of an effective coalition of groups with diverse and contradictory methods (Rossdale 2019, p179).

In the final section I show how this article relates to contemporary anarchist and postanarchist frameworks of power. Uri Gordon's approach resolves the contradictions I have posed by distinguishing between discrete types of power. Holloway and Newman both resolve the contradiction by positing an abstract unity between politics and anti-politics through which their division is reproduced. In Holloway's case anti-politics dominates politics and in Newman's case politics dominates anti-politics. The aim of this paper is to conceptualise a creative tension between the two where neither dominates the other.

## OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE POWER

In this section I aim to demonstrate how an abstract distinction between politics and anti-politics can be thought of in more human terms as a relationship and, specifically, as a relationship of power. I conceptualise power as a dialectical relationship between moments of subjectivity and moments of objectification. I refer

to these as subjective and objective moments of power. Objective power can be thought of as the power to define and act upon the world; to articulate and apply abstract theory to practice. Subjective power, then, is the power of practice to disrupt theory. The multiplicity and particularity of 'lived experience', of being immersed in the world, exposes the limits of abstract knowledge and boundaries.

Objective power is derived from structures that recognise and mediate difference. This is the power gained, both individually and collectively, by claiming an identity, by setting boundaries, by dividing and defining responsibilities. It is realistic in that it recognises differences and sets about finding ways of communicating and redistributing across them. However, it is also cynical; a 'mis-recognition' of difference, treating differences as stable, and thereby producing and entrenching divisions (Rose 1981, p85). Objective power derives from the structures it imposes; the domination of theory over practice, that is necessary for effective action.

Subjective power is rooted in the authority of that which is misrepresented and repressed by objective power. It affirms a wholeness that has been damaged by objective power, but which it can only articulate negatively. Subjective power is the negation of theory by practice. It is Holloway's 'scream of refusal' (2002, p2) or what bell hooks and Elizabeth Janeway have called the 'power to disbelieve' (hooks 1984, p90). It is Walter Benjamin's 'tradition of the oppressed' that exposes the dominant worldview as untenable (Lowy 2005, p57). Subjective power is abolitionist because it rejects absolutely the systems that exploit it and the identities thrust upon it. It is utopian because it cannot positively articulate an alternative.

Subjective power is not merely a negative reaction inferior to objective power; the 'weak stage of a dialectical progression' (Fanon 2021, p112). Subjective power is a revolutionary consciousness that proceeds from the whole historical experience of the oppressed, not only from the experience of oppression (Robinson 2020, p169). The 'integral totality' (ibid.) of the oppressed is the source of their subjective power, their power to expose the mythologies of the oppressor. However, this totality, this wholeness, can itself only be expressed as an alternative mythology containing its own exclusions and oppressions.

Structures such as language, ideology and organisational forms empower me to have an impact on the world around me; without these I would be imprisoned in my subjectivity (Mounier 1952, p42). I therefore become invested in these structures and to deny their contingency is to deny the contingency of my own power in the world. There is a certain safety in believing my identity, or my role in a group, or my worldview, to be fixed. However, there are parts of my social world and parts of my own being that are excluded by these structures. By virtue of being excluded,

these parts expose the contingency of objective power. This is the subjective power to disrupt the fetishisation or mythologisation of objective power.

The relationship between subjective and objective power is dialectical, meaning that it is both mutually constitutive and antagonistic. It consists of continual interaction and dynamic opposition, connected through sparks which leap from one extreme pole to the other (Adorno 2017, p35). The dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity makes transformative action possible. It enables people to reflect and act upon the world (Freire 2017, p25). Objectivity without subjectivity is simplistic, assuming ‘a world without people’ (p24). Subjectivity without objectivity assumes ‘people without a world’ (ibid.).

However, the two can also not be collapsed into one. In Frantz Fanon’s words, ‘the worst mistake would be to believe their mutual dependence automatic [...] an answer must be found on the objective as well as the subjective level’ (Fanon 2021, pxi). The world is not exhausted in subjectivity and subjectivity is not exhausted in the world (Adorno 2017, p73). Their relationship negotiates the infinite thresholds between people as beings that are conscious of the world, and people as beings that are also immersed in the world.

In describing these two moments of power, I want to explore the relationship between the power that comes from making myself vulnerable, and the vulnerability that comes with exercising power. I can only really be heard if I approach others as a being immersed in the world with needs that even I do not fully understand, giving others the power to listen and respond. I am empowered by entrusting power to others. When I listen to others, I have a certain power over them – the power of the interviewer or the therapist – but I am also disempowered because I am centring their story and eclipsing my own. This is what I seek to express by dividing power into two ‘moments’: the power of vulnerability and the vulnerability of power.

Subjective power is ‘the power to seek new ways of being in the world’ and objective power is the ‘power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being’ (Lorde 2007, p111). The two necessitate each other but they also exist in tension. Collective and individual power emerges out of a constant dialectical relationship between objective and subjective power. As Audre Lorde writes, ‘difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged’ (p112). However, when subjective and objective power are divided and polarised, their difference can seem like an absence of power (Du Bois 2017, p9)

Like W.E.B. Du Bois’ ‘double consciousness’, the dialectic of subjective and

objective power is both connection and separation and therefore a means of both empowerment and disempowerment (Winant 2004, p26). Du Bois describes double consciousness as ‘two great and hardly reconcilable streams of thought and ethical strivings’ (Du Bois 2017, p138). On the one hand, there is the striving that I associate with subjective power whose ‘bitter criticism stings while it points out no way of escape’ (ibid.). On the other hand, the striving of objective power accepts the status quo and seeks to make the best of it, through all the institutional means available (p137).

Du Bois describes these two irreconcilable strivings as ‘two warring ideals in one dark body’ (p8). He also observes these contradictory tendencies in the split between northern urban and southern rural Black communities (p137). The tension between these ‘double aims’ therefore divides and disempowers both the individual and the collective. At the same time, double consciousness also means the possibility of reconciliation; a merging of this double self ‘into a better and truer self’ in which neither of the older selves are lost (p9).

Angela Davis’ critique of the prison system shows how the dialectic of subjective and objective power can become fixed structurally in positions of power and powerlessness. Davis describes the simultaneous absence and presence of the prison in people’s lives (Davis 2003, p15). On the one hand, the necessity of prisons is generally accepted and taken for granted and therefore present to most people as an abstract concept. However, only a minority of the population know the reality of prisons from personal experience. Therefore, prisons in practice are strikingly absent from society.

According to Davis, this disconnect from the reality of prisons is also felt by people who have themselves experienced imprisonment. She suggests that the reality of prison is so agonising that even a person who has directly experienced it will tend to escape into its abstract justifications once they are outside. Therefore, the distance between the theory and practice of prisons can only be bridged in the contact and relationship between people inside and outside. The difference in the experience of each group allows the reality of the prison to confront and challenge its ideological and institutional structure.

The subjective power of the prisoner to hold the reality of the prison up to confront its abstract form is predicated on the withdrawal of their objective power, by means of political disenfranchisement and social exclusion. This is a good example of where great subjective power is held by groups whose lived experience exposes the injustice of social institutions, on the very basis of a lack of objective power to shape these institutions. Vice versa, bureaucratic institutions are organ-

ised in a way that exercising objective power is enabled through a withdrawal of subjective power.

For example, the power of participating in democratic elections relinquishes the power to choose except between limited pre-given options. The authority of the front-line worker rests on their implementing strategies and objectives that they have little impact on. The power of the manager is established through their hierarchical distance from the people implementing their decisions, and professional distance from the people impacted by their decisions. They may have the power to decide but they lack the knowledge and experience to make intelligent decisions.

The institutional division of subjective from objective power is collectively disempowering. The separation of decision making from practical experience results in the systematic inefficiency and ignorance of bureaucratic organisations (Graeber 2009, p518). And yet, bureaucracy is very often viewed as a rational and superior form of organisation (*ibid.*). On the one hand, it is true that the prison guard wields power over the prisoner and the manager wields power over the employee. However, I would argue that for both sides the prison and the bureaucracy seem like necessary and unchangeable institutions. Furthermore, global divisions between subjective and objective power are rooted in one-sided oppressive and exploitative relationships that also render us collectively impotent in the face of climate change and crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

These dynamics also exist within grassroots groups and movements. Whether in grassroots unions, faith groups, social centres, or affinity groups, often the very people that the group seeks to reach and represent, and whose 'lived experience' informs the struggle, are excluded from active participation. At the same time, people who have the capacity to actively organise end up overworked and burned out (Gordon 2008, p47). It is not enough to blame individual organisers for these recurring patterns, or to point out that they emerge from the systemic inequalities that groups work within and aim to transform, or to claim that it involves both (Adorno 2017, p186). Instead, the relationship between individual and system is itself at the heart of the problem.

There is always a tension between subjective and objective power. There is always a moment of subjective disempowerment when I exercise authority in a group, performing a certain role or function, and a moment of objective disempowerment when I confront the group in my vulnerability, asking for recognition or protection. These tensions between subjective and objective power intersect infinitely and on multiple dimensions so that each person is empowered and disempowered in different ways. Therefore, the conflicting poles cannot be unified



within one person or group but only in relationship between many people and groups. The attempt to unify subjective and objective power institutionally only deepens their division. This results in rigid divisions between classes of people, through institutions like the prison, borders, and bureaucracy.

Gillian Rose argues that the contradiction between the individual's abstract definition of institutions and her experience of these institutions transforms both the definition and the institution (Rose 1981, p83). I argue that this confrontation can never fully happen within one person or group but only in relationship between people with irreconcilably different experiences of the same institution. Transforming oppressive institutions then requires bringing the people they separate together into collective action. Rigid divisions between subjective and objective power are transformed through mutual engagement and confrontation between people divided by power relations.

Attempts to reconcile the dialectic of objective and subjective power within a unified framework, for example in the working class, a nation state, or an anarchist utopia, reproduces an exclusive, conservative, and Eurocentric world view (Ciccariello-Maher 2017, p11). The tension between subjective and objective power can only be kept alive within a movement whose boundaries are constantly destabilised from within and without. They are reconciled at the interstices between different groups, movements, ideologies, and tactics.

I have shown how the dialectic of subjective and objective power becomes institutionally fixed and dichotomised into positions of power and powerlessness. Following the insights of Sylvia Wynter, I would further argue that this dichotomy becomes fixed in our minds or, in Wynter's words, is 'made flesh' (McKittrick 2015, p27). We therefore cannot change how we think about power without changing power relations in real life. Both our minds and our institutions can only be changed simultaneously through reciprocal cooperation between that which is fixed as 'powerful' and as 'powerless'. For example, Wynter observes that Frantz Fanon's two selves, his oppressed colonised self and his French professional psychiatrist self, were 'jointly dedicated' to the war against colonialism (p52).

The categories of 'power' and 'powerlessness' allow us to recognise differences of power, but also simplify and misrepresent these relationships. Power cannot be reduced to such abstract categories. However, without such categories we cannot begin to address power relations. I therefore suggest that we must use terms such as 'power' and 'powerlessness' or 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' to acknowledge differences of power and allow these differences, and the categories that mediate them, to be complicated and transformed through our interactions.

Reciprocal cooperation between the powerful and powerless requires recognition that their interdependence is mutual. The powerless desire objective power and the powerful desire the subjective power to speak 'truth to power'. For example, bell hooks observes that the more privileged members of feminist coalitions appear most eager to stress their roles as victims, whereas the less privileged members emphasise the little personal power they do possess (hooks 1984, p45).

The problem is that neither group can empower itself independently from the other. Trying to empower ourselves independently from others results in the conversion of subjective into objective power instead of reconciling the two. For instance, liberal identity politics turn experiences of poverty and oppression into cultural capital instead of exposing the exclusions of capitalism (Lagalis 2016, p358).

Reciprocal cooperation enables the subjective empowerment of the powerful and the objective empowerment of the powerless. Only through such collaboration does their mutual interdependency become unthreatening (Lorde 2007, p111). Cooperation collectively empowers the powerful and powerless to transform their relationship. Coalitions, therefore, are much more than just strategic alliances between groups. In the following section, I will argue that coalitions dynamically reconcile the dialectic of subjective and objective power and are in turn constantly destabilised and transformed by the dialectic.

## **COALITIONS OF POLITICS AND ANTI-POLITICS**

The political moments of organising can now be thought of as moments of objective empowerment and anti-political moments as moments of subjective empowerment. Political structures include and thereby objectively empower some and exclude, thereby subjectively empowering, others. The disruption of political structures subjectively empowers those who were included by those structures and is made possible by different structures that objectively empower others. The gap between the two moments therefore lies in the relationships between different groups of people and experiences of power.

For example, carving out autonomous spaces can be read as an anti-political practice, where groups who are objectively empowered seek subjective power in relation to the state. Autonomous spaces are only viable if groups have access to resources and political power, if they hold objective power. Projects such as cooperatives and social centres rely on individual organisers who can volunteer their time and skills, they require groups to have access to social capital, and be recognised or

at least tolerated by local authorities. Therefore, such spaces are often dominated by white and middle-class activists who have access to the necessary resources and connections.

Autonomous spaces therefore risk becoming isolated and homogenous, reproducing the very privileges and hierarchies they are trying to overcome. To sustain their anti-politics, such spaces must work to include and collaborate with people and groups with less political power and resources. Objectively empowered groups cannot subjectively empower themselves in isolation. They can only achieve this through collaboration with less 'objectively' powerful groups, and by letting go of objective power in their collaboration with these groups. Collaboration can therefore be feared as sacrificing political effectiveness for the sake of 'identity politics' or 'sectarianism'.

Fighting for access to resources and political representation can be read as a political practice where subjectively empowered groups seek objective power by engaging with state institutions. When people demand rights that they are denied, they challenge basic assumptions underlying existing power relations. When migrants claim the right to live and work in the UK, or when sex workers claim the right to be recognised and protected, they challenge the racist and misogynist assumptions that legitimise the state. By virtue of being excluded, their political practice challenges the state's legitimacy and therefore has an anti-political aspect.

However, their exclusion also means that their efforts are more likely to fail. Collaboration with people whose rights are recognised by the state can lend force to the demands of the excluded and therefore increases the political effectiveness of their activism (King 2016, p78). This, however, involves letting go of subjective power in relation to more privileged groups. Collaboration can therefore be feared as a dilution of the anti-political power of oppressed groups.

I have shown that the dialectic of politics and anti-politics is not a logical contradiction but a social one rooted in real relationships. Taking this dialectic seriously means that grassroots organising is to fight a simultaneous struggle on two levels, like operating 'two levers of a machine whose action it cannot harmonize' (Mounier 1952, p94). To focus on the anti-political impulse is to rely too much on the energy of the powerless to challenge the powerful. This is to rely too heavily on the spontaneity and compassion of the individual, on the endurance of the activist, and it is to romanticise the revolutionary power of the oppressed.

A one-sided focus on the anti-political is not sustainable. Inevitably, new structures form even if we refuse to recognise them. Direct actions become stale reproductions of ritualised confrontation (Gordon 2008, p103), and 'structure-

less' groups develop informal elites (Freeman 2012, p69). However, our problems can also not be solved exclusively through structure. To prioritise the political is to rely too much on rigid ideologies, methods, and moralities that stifle creativity and difference (Montgomery and Bergman 2017, p229). It is to dismiss the role of spontaneity and subjectivity, and the revolutionary consciousness of the oppressed.

Both moments of engaging in political organising and moments of anti-political rupture are necessary. However, this is not simply to say that institutions must be built, abolished, rebuilt, and abolished again. This would make the people engaging in organising dispensable subjects to a method, reproducing the predominance of the political. Furthermore, the two moments cannot be reconciled within one unitary group or movement. It is not enough for a group to include a diverse set of tactics. The group itself must be destabilised by its diversity.

Coalitions are a way of organising that can potentially sustain creative tensions between political moments of organising and anti-political moments of rupture. Coalitions provide a political structure through which different groups, bringing various experiences of power and using different tactics, can engage in concerted action. At the same time, the diversity of the groups indicates a more expansive movement that challenges the limits of, and thereby destabilises, the coalition.

Following the insights of intersectional theorists, I see coalitions as a means of dynamically reconciling the need for collective action with the need to confront differences of power and privilege (Broad 2017, p46). Intersectional politics has been described as a 'politics in the cracks' between movements rather than a closed movement within itself (ibid.). Intersectionality posits a collective politics that is unified and yet irreducibly heterogeneous and unstable (Collins 2008, p616). Different struggles are neither isolated and external to each other, nor are they internally connected within a hierarchy of oppressions. Instead, they are linked by multiple and contradictory 'intersections'.

Erica Lagalisse provides a helpful metaphor, comparing grassroots groups to interdependent species of mushrooms that live together in 'patches' (Lagalisse 2016, p189). In this metaphor, coalitions are not 'hygienic' networks that connect individual autonomous nodes, and neither do they subsume everyone into one homogenous species. 'Patches' involve overlaps between different groups, different tactics and organising strategies, and 'impurities of all kinds' (p372).

In coalitions, the collective whole and the individual parts are connected by intersecting 'subterranean passages' (Adorno 2017, p169). Each group is integrated into the coalition structure. However, the coalition structure is also integrated by the individual groups into a wider social struggle that cannot be systematically

organised without suppressing and excluding differences within. The coalition structure is not 'above' the individual groups, but the individual groups are also not fully autonomous and isolated. The relationship between the collective whole and the parts is an ongoing and dynamic power struggle.

I argue that coalitions therefore provide an example of collective organising based on a 'principle of incompleteness' (Robinson 1980, p198). Coalitions are political structures that challenge the authority and completeness of the political. This paradox is made possible by the diversity of the groups brought together in coalition. The weaving together of different beliefs, tactics and ideologies means that all these different forces, while playing a necessary structuring function in organising, are equally incomplete (p199).

The UK-based Stop the Arms Fair Coalition is a contemporary example of a successful coalition (Rossdale 2019, p178). This is a coalition of different groups that take action together to protest against the DSEI arms fair in London every two years. It aims to call attention to, disrupt, and eventually shut down the arms fair. Each group decides its own strategy and tactics which results in a wide spread of actions including lock-ons, noise demos, art, comedy, prayer, blockades, die-ins, and academic discussion. I was involved in organising with this coalition from 2015 to 2019.

The coalition brings together groups with a firm commitment to non-violent direct action including the Campaign Against Arms Trade, Trident Ploughshares and the Peace Pledge Union, and groups who refuse such a commitment, including Disarm DSEI and Smash EDO (pp184-186). Since its founding in 2011, the coalition has successfully increased the number of participants and the scale and variety of actions taken to protest DSEI (p48). At the same time, there are tensions between the groups who commit to non-violence and those that do not, and between groups who see their protest as symbolic in nature, affirming the possibility of peace and justice, and groups who seek to effectively force the arms fair to shut down (p192).

On the one hand, I think of symbolic and non-violent actions as anti-political, and actions that seek to force the arms fair to shut down as political. On the other hand, I think of adherence to principles of non-violence as political and the refusal of such adherence as anti-political. The root of this apparent contradiction lies in positions of power. The non-violent activist is in a position of powerlessness towards the police officer or arms dealer but in a position of power when imposing their strategy on others. What I find significant about the STAF coalition is that its diversity of tactics approach opposes the firm commitment to non-violence held

by some of its members and at the same time includes these members. It unifies the two poles, the political and anti-political, without eliminating their opposition and is therefore able to maintain a creative tension between the two.

Diversity of tactics has been criticised as a superficial compromise that represses true diversity (p179). Collective action is indeed achieved by means of group structures that exclude and suppress differences to some extent. However, I argue that the coalition's group structures are constantly disrupted and contested by the diversity of its individual members. The coalition is therefore not a static compromise but a dynamic and precarious alliance whose exclusions are constantly contested and undone.

Coalitions therefore integrate political moments that make possible organisation, accountability, and communication, with anti-political moments where individual groups or persons assert their difference, disrupting the coalition structures. This delicate balance can escalate in two directions. If the anti-political predominates, diversity of tactics becomes permissiveness. If the political predominates, then diversity of tactics becomes a superficial diversity. Both these possibilities are reflected in the concerns of individual STAF members.

For example, there have been concerns among the groups in STAF that are committed to non-violence, that the diversity of tactics approach could go 'too far' and ignore or suppress their rejection of actions that they would consider violent (p194). Rosdale speculates that the coalition might not hold if, for example, there was actual fighting between protestors and police or security forces (p195). This is probably true; however, new coalitions would likely form in its place including individuals from both sides of the spectrum. This is because, as Rosdale points out, people's individual positions are nuanced and do not always neatly fall into either camp (p193).

The London Anarchist Bookfair provides an example where a coalition broke down leaving space for a new coalition to form and the movement around it to develop and grow. When I first attended the bookfair in 2011 it was an overwhelmingly white, male, straight and atheist environment that I experienced as extremely intimidating. Over the years, feminist, queer, Black, Asian, Latinx, other ethnic minority and religious groups and individuals became increasingly visible, but the environment did not become significantly less tense or intimidating.

In 2017 these tensions finally erupted when a (non-anarchist) group distributed transphobic leaflets at the event. This incident exposed the transphobia of some of the groups and individuals involved in the bookfair and triggered heated discussions about how to hold people accountable in self-organised anarchist

spaces. The collective that organised the 2017 event decided to step back and in 2019 a new group announced it would organise an Anarchist Bookfair in London with a commitment to providing a more diverse and inclusive space (Freedom News 2020).

Alongside the concerns that the diversity of tactics approach in STAF could go 'too far', there have also been concerns that the coalition is not diverse enough. The coalition has worked with activists from Bahrain, Palestine, Kurdistan, and Yemen, as well as refugee and migrant groups (Rossdale 2019, pp198, 202). Nevertheless, the active members of the coalition who attend meetings and coordinate actions are mostly white (p198). The broader anti-militarist movement also appears overwhelmingly white. However, as Rossdale points out, this is partly because white activists define their own interests and activities as 'anti-militarist', excluding certain forms and sites of resistance such as migrants' rights and resistance to policing (p202).

When groups define 'anti-militarism' and 'non-violent' action, or in other ways define the limits of what kind of action is considered effective or legitimate, differences of power are reproduced and fixed. However, if it is left to each individual to decide what they consider effective and legitimate, how can activists be held accountable? How can they know that their action is supported by the movements of which they are part?

Coalitions enable groups to define their boundaries and hold each other accountable while also working together across differences. Although STAF is a predominantly white coalition, the groups that form part of it also integrate STAF into a more expansive movement. They integrate STAF into anti-colonial, anti-border and anti-prison movements which are more diverse than the – narrowly defined – anti-militarist movement. All these movements and the issues they tackle are connected but they cannot be organised systematically under one umbrella organisation without reproducing exclusions. Instead, different struggles and levels of power can be connected through a dynamic network of intersecting and overlapping coalitions.

We can also look at individual groups, identities, campaigns, and specific direct actions as coalitions. These are all particular constellations that integrate individual actors and are also integrated by those individual actors within a larger, but unsystematic, movement. Individual members of the group are not fully integrated into the group. They are also members of other groups, whose aims and practices may contradict. Each individual therefore also disrupts and destabilises the abstract unity imposed by the group. For example, religious anarchists, Black

lesbians, and working-class intellectuals challenge and destabilise the divisions between the different communities they are part of.

The perspective I have developed here simultaneously challenges and includes approaches to organising that emphasise either the autonomy of individual groups or the systematic unity of social justice movements. Groups that emphasise their autonomy primarily view coalitions as instrumental. Such coalitions enable mutual solidarity and support, but they do not hold groups accountable or interfere with how groups operate and behave. The Anti-Militarist Network was an example of an instrumental coalition (Rossdale 2019, p178).

Groups that emphasize the unity of movements tend to trivialise, suppress, or water down differences, resulting in a homogeneity that masks exclusions. The group aims to *be* the movement rather than being part of it. A good example of this approach is Extinction Rebellion (XR), which is a particular campaign with a specific theory of change, and yet presents itself as a decentralised and politically non-partisan global movement.

I view these two approaches as a spectrum between political and anti-political practices. On the one side there is an emphasis on unifying structures, on the other there is an emphasis on autonomy from structure. However, taken separately, they are simply sides of the same coin. Autonomy is quickly recuperated to mean a bourgeois autonomy of the self (Lagalisse 2016, p372). Both approaches reinforce an abstract and bounded unity, either of the individual group or the larger movement. This is why when you separate individual struggles for social justice, you ‘retreat into the bourgeois order of things’ (McKittrick 2015, p23).

Taken together, different approaches to organising destabilise each other and thereby destabilise capitalist power relations. In practice, we find overlaps and coalitions between groups that emphasise autonomy and groups that prioritise systematic organisation. For example, in the UK, recent actions against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill have brought together anarchist groups and groups affiliated with XR. The engagement between these different groups and organising strategies not only enables mass collective action but also has the potential to confront and transform power relations within the movement.

## CONTEMPORARY ANARCHIST THEORIES OF POWER

In this final section, I show how my approach relates to other contemporary anarchist frameworks of power. Uri Gordon’s distinction between different types of power eliminates any contradiction between politics and anti-politics. Saul Newman



rejects the contradiction, emphasising the interconnectedness of politics and anti-politics. By contrast, John Holloway emphasises the ‘intensely contradictory nature’ of power (Holloway 2002, p15). However, in Holloway’s view the aim of grassroots organising is to overcome rather than sustain this contradiction. By highlighting the problems with each of these frameworks, I demonstrate the significance of my own approach which has aimed to understand and explain the contradictions we experience in grassroots organising rather than explaining them away.

Uri Gordon distinguishes three types of power: power-over, power-with and power-to. Power-over is the coercive power to influence others against their will or interest (Gordon 2008, p50). Power-with is non-coercive influence within a non-hierarchical context where people view each other as equals (p48). This is ‘the power that determines how much you are listened to in a group’ (Starhawk 2011, p46). Power-to is the basic capacity of the individual to influence the world either through coercive or non-coercive influence. Power-to involves skills, abilities, knowledge, and resources that enable the exercise of power.

Based on this framework, Gordon argues that anarchist groups seek to abolish domination which he defines as the systematic exercise of power-over (p51). In this view, problematic power dynamics within anarchist groups are not caused by power-over. Instead, they stem from either unequal access to, or the abusive exercise of, power-with (p55). Gordon argues that formalised leadership structures and systems of accountability reproduce power-over and are therefore both ideologically and practically incompatible with anarchism (p63).

Gordon eliminates the tension between political and anti-political moments in grassroots organising by imposing a distinction between coercive and non-coercive types of power. He resolves the question of how to both build and abolish power by splitting power into two. In this view, the power that we build is a different type of power from the power that we seek to resist and abolish. Whereas I see disagreements between structured and structureless organising, or abolitionist and reformist perspectives, as creative tensions within anarchist groups and movements, Gordon treats these as differences between anarchist and non-anarchist perspectives and practices.

Gordon’s differentiation between the different types of power is rooted in a rigid distinction between the ‘dynamic’ exercise of power, and the ‘static’ context within which power is exercised (p55). Gordon’s distinction neglects how these aspects of power also mutually constitute each other. For example, Gordon argues that the possession of power exists ‘logically and temporally prior to its use’ (p53). However, the resources and skills that create capacity for power are in turn also

developed through the exercise of power. For example, confidence is gained by being listened to. The relationship between the capacity for and the exercise of power is therefore dialectical (Pritchard 2020, p18).

Furthermore, Gordon's distinction between power-over and power-with relies on an assumption that power operates differently in grassroots groups than it does in wider society (Gordon 2008, p53). He defines power-with as power exercised in a non-hierarchical context. However, such a context is never completely given, precisely because the world of grassroots organising is not separate from wider society. Gordon acknowledges that social hierarchies such as racism, sexism and ableism play a role in grassroots groups, but he does not consider how this deconstructs his distinction between power-over and power-with.

Gordon's framework eliminates the contradiction between political and anti-political moments of power by distinguishing between different types of power. Holloway, on the other hand, emphasises the dialectical unity of power. However, this is only an abstract unity; an internal contradiction which reproduces abstract distinctions between politics and anti-politics.

Holloway defines power-to as a 'social flow of doing' that unifies subjectivity, a conscious projection beyond that which exists, with a 'fleeting moment' of objectification where what is created gains an independent existence as a thing before it is re-integrated into the social flow of doing (Holloway 2002, p18). Holloway's power-to is the ability to both conceive and realise something other than what already exists. Power-to therefore resolves and unifies the dialectic of subjective and objective power.

Holloway describes power-over as the fracturing of this unity. It is the separation of conception and realisation through divisions of labour: 'doing is broken as the 'powerful' conceive but do not execute, while the others execute but do not conceive' (p19). The objects created by the social flow of doing are not reintegrated but expropriated and used to dominate. The ideas and systems that communities create to enable them to work and live together or organise for social change, congeal into rigid ideologies and moralities that stifle creativity and difference (Montgomery and Bergman 2017, p229).

Holloway's power-to is a harmonious and unified relationship between conception and realisation. Power-over is a situation of alienation and domination. Holloway argues that power-over and power-to cannot coexist peacefully (p24). In a world of capitalist and imperialist domination, power-to therefore only exists negatively in opposition to power-over. Holloway refers to this negative power-to as 'anti-power' or 'anti-politics'.

Based on this view of power, Holloway distinguishes between politics which reproduces power-over, and anti-politics which is the struggle to abolish politics and liberate power-to (p130). Holloway therefore resolves the contradiction between the aims of building and abolishing power by distinguishing, not between different types, but different stages of power. He encloses the dialectic of power into a predetermined progression or 'longitudinal totality' (Ciccariello-Maher 2017, p64).

Holloway's approach neglects the ways in which anti-politics depends on politics. For example, he distinguishes between an 'anti-politics of events' and 'a politics of organisation' (p131). This opposition between events and organisation begs the question how events can come about without being organised. Holloway acknowledges that 'events do not happen spontaneously' and tries to resolve this contradiction by referencing the crucial work of 'dedicated militants' (p131). However, he thereby separates the existence of dedicated militants from the organisations and power relations through which they are socialised and held accountable. The contradiction between organisation and event is assumed to be resolved in the abstract figure of a 'militant' without specifying how this militant goes about resolving this contradiction and at what cost.

Furthermore, according to Holloway, power-to only exists negatively in the form of anti-politics. However, he describes anti-politics as a unified struggle that includes diverse struggles without subordinating the 'infinite richness of struggle' (p131). Holloway's anti-politics, then, is already power-to; a social flow of doing in which the divided labour of different groups is unified. This means that Holloway's anti-politics does not only negate politics but includes it. A movement that genuinely unifies diverse struggles, and relies on militant activists embedded in power relations, does not abolish but relies on politics.

My point is a subtle one because Holloway does not dismiss the importance of politics altogether. However, he takes the existence of politics for granted and, in doing so, takes for granted existing political structures and the status quo with which they are bound up. If capitalism and the nation state were abolished, would the construction of new forms of organisation happen automatically? Holloway treats the political as a constant and thereby his anti-politics loses its credibility. As Cedric Robinson has pointed out, the issue with anarchist conceptions of anti-politics is not that they are naïve but that they do not actually transcend capitalist ideology (Robinson 1980, p212).

Holloway equates capitalist alienation with alienation in a universal sense, and politics as we know it with 'the political'. He takes politics as given and one-sidedly

theorises anti-political struggle. I argue that both the political and the anti-political, and how they relate to each other must be theorised. If anti-politics is tethered to a politics that is assumed to be universal, anti-politics remains a reactionary shadow with no real power to transcend the status quo.

Holloway's emphasis on the unity between conception and realisation ignores how their alienation is also necessary for collective action and social change. Without this alienation there is no social collective, only a homogeneous 'organic' mass. If conception and realisation do not challenge, destabilise, and constantly renew each other, there can be no collective power and no social change. I am therefore suggesting that power relations must always exist, but that they must constantly be disrupted and renegotiated.

Newman's postanarchist approach to power affirms that 'power in some form will always be with us' (Newman 2010a, p267). He argues that a radical politics is only possible if it has an anti-political dimension and anti-politics is only possible through the politics of organising. This approach follows Michel Foucault's argument, that power and resistance constitute each other (p265). The problem with this account of power is that it neutralises the antagonism between politics and anti-politics, collapsing them into one and thereby reproducing the domination of one over the other. Anti-politics is subsumed within a 'politics of anti-politics' (p271).

Newman's account therefore neutralises the paradoxical nature of power relations. It does not explain how acts of resistance can both rupture power relations and be co-opted into them (Rose 1984, p90); why the same type of action can be liberating in one instance and reproduce oppressive relations in another. For example, Newman states that although forms of resistance are implicated within state institutions, what makes them radical is that 'they nevertheless presuppose a certain autonomy from the state' (Newman 2010a, p270). He does not, however, explain why exactly a politics outside of the logic of the state is radical and what would make it different.

Newman further suggests that power relations can be democratised and made more reciprocal but offers no analysis of how democratisation can be brought about (p267). These observations remain distant and abstract, offering no real insights for activists and organisers. Newman acknowledges that certain tactics have the potential to rupture, destabilise and transform power relations; that there is always a 'moment of unpredictability in struggles of resistance' (p269). My point, however, is that his concept of power does not adequately explain why this is the case.

To focus on the mutually constitutive relationship between politics and anti-politics without taking seriously their antagonism gives us endlessly shifting constellations of power and resistance with no possibility of liberation (Holloway 2002, p26). Newman characterises liberation as a 'strategic game' with no final liberation from power (Newman 2010a, p167). A major problem with this view is that it prioritises elitist perspectives of resistance (Franks 2007, p21). The importance attributed to liberation and abolition by many grassroots activists and organisers is treated as naïve.

While this paper affirms the necessity of power relations, it also theorises how power relations can be radically transformed, and new previously inconceivable relationships can be developed. I hold that this is not a naïve endeavour but a paradoxical approach responding to the paradoxical nature of power relations that organisers and activists grapple with every day. This paper has aimed to explore a dialectical model of power that unfolds the paradoxical nature of real social relationships.

## CONCLUSION

Tensions between different traditions, practices, ideologies, groups, and tactics are necessary for collective action that can radically transform society. These tensions can be viewed as dialectical relationships between political and anti-political moments of organising, rooted in the dialectic of subjective and objective power. Coalitions based on a diversity of tactics are able to sustain these tensions because they bring different groups and tactics into collective action, while the principle of diversity also destabilises the coalitions' structures.

This paper has offered a creative analysis of power from a perspective of grassroots organising. It therefore contributes towards, and affirms the necessity of, interventions into anarchist and social theory more generally, from the knowledges developed in grassroots movements. Furthermore, it explores the nature of the contradictions and dilemmas of political organising and suggests ways in which these contradictions can be reconciled dynamically and collectively through coalitions. Finally, it explores an 'anarchist dialectics' that seeks to account for how power and powerlessness are entangled and mutually constitutive while also antagonistic, creating openings for radical social change.

*I would like to thank Annika Lübbert, Anastasia Christou, Sam Garrett, Josh Lawes, Elizabeth Vasileva, Matthias Kramm and the two anonymous reviewers*

*for their valuable feedback, and all the wonderful organisers, activists, writers, and friends whose insights and example I have drawn from.*

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