

Editorial: What Happened to the Anarchist Century?

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It was going to be, we were enthusiastically told, the anarchist century. Most famously, this prophesy was spelled out by David Graeber and Andrej Grubacic in their widely read article, 'Anarchism, or The Revolutionary Movement of the Twenty-First Century', but it would be unfair, and unwise, to single these two authors out as the lone voices expressing such optimism; indeed, whilst their arguments were evidently influential, they also simply articulated what was fast becoming a certain common-sense of the radical left. Arguably, much of the twentieth century could be understood as a slow move away from state socialism and towards anarchism, but by 2004 when Graeber and Grubacic published their article, anarchism was everywhere, dominating the landscape of social movements and structuring their conversations, their strategies, their norms. It was also to be found increasingly wandering the corridors of universities. The sense that this was anarchism's time, that it was no longer the poor second cousin to Marxism, was as palpable as it was inspiring.

There was another reason for this optimism – just as powerful, but ultimately flawed. Whether it was killing people in their millions in gulags, or capitulating to capitalism in such profound ways that any semblance of socialism was annihilated, the left's various engagements with state power throughout the twentieth century had failed; undeniably, we needed to find another way to destroy those systems that are themselves so relentlessly destructive. But this truth too often encouraged a lapse into a binary thinking within anarchism: if it wasn't the old way, the statist way, the electoral way, the Marxist way, then it had to be anarchism, and it had to be the very particular expression of anarchism as articulated by these new social movements and their specific understandings of political and social intervention. But simply pointing to the failures of the old left – even of old, classical, or capital A anarchism – says precisely nothing about the normative and strategic validity of this development in radical thought. Just as capitalism flourished in the second-half of the century in part thanks to its capacity to present itself as the only

viable alternative to an increasingly unravelling communist bloc, so too the 'new anarchism' was arguably embraced as much for what it wasn't as for what it was. But what was false for capitalism was no less false for anarchism. We needed to be convincing on our own terms, not by virtue of the failures of others.

The deficiencies of this binary reasoning, important as they are to bring to mind, do not of course detract from the validity of the first cause for anarchic hope. For a time, anarchism unquestionably constituted the radical conjuncture, formed the common-sense, shaped the conversation. But then, almost as quickly as it had emerged onto the global stage, anarchism began to fade away, increasingly replaced by a renewed interest in electoral strategies and a growing rejection of what Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams labelled 'folk-politics'. This 'electoral turn' was of course enthusiastically greeted by those who had never been won over to the anarchist project, but appealed to, it seems, to many anarchists. Before his untimely death, David Graeber – anarchism's most high profile champion by a considerable margin – became something of a convert to this changing dynamic, enthusiastically promoting Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party he briefly led. Less visibly, anarchists around the UK began knocking on doors, encouraging people to get out and vote, a process that was replicated in numerous other countries, with new, or newly re-energised, parties of the left emerging out of the vibrant world of anarchist-inspired social movements. Friends who had mocked me – or worse – for my occasional efforts to help Green Party councillors get elected were now out in force, campaigning for their local Labour candidate.

The really remarkable, and worrying, feature of this shift was the extent to which anarchists themselves seem to have been more or less silent about it. Throughout it all, almost no one seemed concerned to ask what was happening: was this the end of anarchism's brief resurgence? Or was this approach somehow consistent with the supposedly 'new' anarchism of the twenty-first century? Whilst we can safely assume that, in cafes, pubs and on email lists around the world, people pondered these questions, there has evidently been no sustained or collective attempt within the academic world of anarchist studies to confront these last few years with an honest and critical appraisal.

There are any numbers of reasons for this, and a fair few of them are not only valid but, as I see it, entirely positive. I always had my concerns about the way in which anarchism was being brought back to life, arguing that prefiguration – that defining feature of contemporary anarchist praxis – was far too narrowly circumscribed within a cluster of practices which still ultimately centred on protest, rather than on any durable building of a new world. Of course, I wasn't alone, and it's clear that many anarchist academics are now engaged in explorations of

myriad examples of grassroots alternative organising: on some level, it's perfectly reasonable that such work is unconcerned with the contemporary status of headline-grabbing social movements (or the lack thereof) and chooses instead to focus on localised projects and practices which remain all but invisible to the rest of the world. But the two are not unrelated.

The cultural theorist Stuart Hall never tired of reminding the left of the importance of keeping a close eye on the conjunctural terrain: the particular social and political make-up of any given moment, and the possible directions it might be heading. Part of this conjunctural analysis relied on an understanding of the role that common-sense plays in shaping social practices, and the ways in which theses common-senses can change, sometimes subtly but no less powerfully. Unquestionably, anarchism helped shape a common-sense of not only the radical left, but within a much broader social field of practice: organising using consensus, or with horizontal structures, for example, have become the norm in many groups; so too has the emphasis on prefigurative praxis and DIY culture, rather than looking to the state to solve our problems. But this culture, can, and likely will change, if anarchist-inspired social movements continue to decline, and if they are replaced – as is possible but by no means inevitable – with more openly vertical or even authoritarian left imaginaries.

Of course, if it's true that the anarchist century did not get very far before encountering a swift detour, an 'electoral turn', it's equally the case that this shift in the landscape is far from stable. The road we're travelling down has already led us somewhere else; not back to anarchism – not yet at any rate - but into open country. With regards radical politics (and, indeed, much else) the present conjuncture is very much an undefined and contested one. As Owen Worth discusses in this issue, the limitations of electoral strategies were exposed (to those who didn't already see them) almost as quickly as the interest in them (re)emerged. The various electoral movements that sprang up with Corbyn and Sanders, Syriza and Podemos, will need to find a new way of understanding their own failings, and decide how to respond. Here, Worth suggests a counter-hegemonic approach built around a genuine left convergence – a position which is arguably gaining traction, but which is still likely to be resisted by many anarchists.

Regardless of these recent upsets for the electoral left, there are some who still argue for the necessity of such politics by pointing to anarchism's recent failure. The left had over a century to make good on Marx's defeat of Bakunin, and it failed, again and again; that anarchists were unable to destroy global capitalism in less than two decades is hardly an argument for its deficiency as a political project, and even less of an argument for a return to a politics that failed more consistently,

more spectacularly, and more murderously, for over a hundred years. But once again, the paucity of this line of reasoning does nothing to justify our own politics. Frankie Hines argues here that the centrality of prefiguration to contemporary anarchism is largely motivated by an ongoing desire to distance anarchism from Marxism, implicitly reminding us once more that both the ‘anarchist/prefigurative’ and ‘electoral’ turns of recent years appear to be at least partly motivated and shaped by mutual rejection. Unlike the growing criticisms of anarchism and anarchist-inspired social movements emanating from electoral corners, however, Hines raises questions which challenge not anarchism per se, but its contemporary pre-occupation with prefiguration and its absolutist rejection of violence.

Of course, we have never had the luxury of not having to think seriously about leftist strategy, but the present terrain presents us with particular challenges – and, potentially, opportunities. But to begin to move forward, we need to engage more explicitly with this present moment, which also means examining, critically and honestly, our recent past. How did we get to where we are – and where, exactly, are we? In 2004, the idea that someone like Graeber would be championing the Labour Party was unimaginable: we were supposed to be changing the world *without* taking (state) power; it’s reasonable enough that individual and collective strategies change, but the apparent unwillingness amongst anarchists to honestly address and understand these shifts is curious, to say the least. In my conversation with Gabriel Kuhn, we discuss the reasons for this silence, and consider, as Kuhn has done elsewhere, what next for the anarchist century. The answer to that question, of course, is neither simple nor absolute, and reading his thoughts whilst looking through the two other articles published here, it struck me that the anarchism of today appears to have lost a *common-sense* and the possibilities of mass mobilising which comes with it. Of course, anarchists will never tire of telling themselves how much they cherish diversity, but the anarchist century became imaginable precisely because diversity was in many respects contained within the quite narrow parameters of a particular radical imaginary: an anarchist common-sense.

Occupy didn’t change the world, and neither did the return to the ballot box: there are many other ways we might hope to do so, and evidently many anarchists – and others – are getting on with their own chosen strategies. But if we want to cohere again into something that feels like a mass movement with any real hope of standing up against the current hegemony, we will need to come together to more humbly consider how we came to be where we are now, and what we plan to do next. At the very least, it seems intellectually and politically wrong to have collectively championed an anarchist century and then walked away silently when things

didn't quite turn out as planned.

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