

# **Empowering anarchy Power, hegemony, and anarchist strategy<sup>1</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Beginning with the question: how should contemporary anarchists respond to the political challenges facing them, I examine the relation between anarchist practices and power. I draw on Gramsci's concept of hegemony to suggest that an appropriate response to these challenges would be to construct an anarchist counter-hegemony. But how can a movement seemingly based on the rejection of power relations adopt a strategy premised on (counter)power? I argue that anarchist practices embody different understandings of power: one views power as external to human activity, the other one as decentralised and ubiquitous. I link this second view to post-structuralist analyses to show that power is necessarily productive, making counter-hegemony an acceptable strategy. Anarchism thus becomes (productive) power guided ethics, and I suggest that the ethics appropriate for an anarchist project would be an ethics of difference. Finally, I discuss anarchist projects embodying ideas similar to those developed in this essay.

## **I. PROLOGUE: ANARCH-Y/-ISTS/-ISM**

How does one define something that draws its lifeblood from defying convention, from a burning conviction that what is, is wrong, and from the active attempt to change what is into what could be?<sup>2</sup> Definitions necessarily try to fix the 'meaning' of something at any given point, and they imply that I, who do the defining, have the power to identify the limits of 'anarchism', to say what is legitimately anarchist. It is probably better, then, to start with clarifying what anarchism is not: it is definitely not a question of ancient Greek etymology, as in: 'the prefix "an" linked to the word "archy" suggests that "anarchism" means ...'; neither is it a question of analysing the writings of one dead white male or another, a type of approach that would look at books written by anarchist luminaries like Kropotkin or Proudhon, and would then proclaim that the essence of anarchism can be found in either one, or a combination of the two;<sup>3</sup> nor is it, finally, a question of organisational continuity with the rebels who were killed in Kronstadt or the anarchists who fought in the Spanish civil war.

This is not to say that a historical approach to anarchism is not relevant -

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only that an attempt to seek a purely historical definition of anarchism would in some sense commit an act of intellectual violence against those people who today think of themselves as anarchist, anarchist-inspired, or as 'libertarian socialists': most of those have not read Kropotkin, Bakunin, or even more contemporary anarchists such as Murray Bookchin, or did not read any of their works *prior* to thinking of themselves as anarchists. Barbara Epstein has tried to come to terms with this relative lack of 'ideological purity' by arguing that today's anarchism is not really ideologically proper *anarchism*, but rather a collection of what she terms 'anarchist sensibilities' (Epstein 2001: 4). However: in suggesting that today's anarchists are not really anarchists, even if they think of themselves as such, Epstein has made precisely the mistake that academics frequently make when talking about activists, that is, to define a 'proper' way of doing/being/thinking, and then identifying the ways in which activists diverge from the true path as identified by the intellectual elite.<sup>4</sup>

How can we then avoid this type of definitional 'violence', but still have something to talk about, that is, something that is identifiably 'anarchist'? First, I suggest, by letting those people who actually think of themselves as anarchists or themselves acknowledge certain anarchist influences in their political work speak *and act* for themselves. Because if anarchism is anything today, then it is not a set of dogmas and principles, but a set of practices and actions within which certain principles manifest themselves.<sup>5</sup> Anarchism is not primarily about what is written, but about what is done: it is the simultaneous negation of things as they are, the anger that flows from viewing the world as riddled with oppression and injustice, and the belief that this anger is pointless if one does not seek to do something different in the here and now. What makes these practices specifically anarchist in the eyes of today's activists does of course vary from group to group, from person to person. For now, however, I will understand anarchist practices in the realm of political organisation and expression as those practices that consciously seek to minimise hierarchies and oppose oppression in all walks of life, a desire which manifests itself in various organisational forms such as communes, federations, affinity groups, and consensus-seeking structures.<sup>6</sup> In other words, anarchism is a scream, not one of negation,<sup>7</sup> but of affirmation: it is about going beyond rejecting, about starting to create an alternative in the present to that which triggered the scream in the first place ('prefigurative politics').<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that anarchist practices always achieve that - in fact, the main body of this essay will deal with the question of which barriers there are in anarchism itself to reaching its own goal. Instead, this merely gives a broad frame of reference to a discussion of anarchism, a frame that will be refined as the essay develops.

One disclaimer before the discussion starts: since I have suggested that it is only by letting today's anarchists talk and act that we can find out what anarchism 'really' is, I have been forced to rely on the anarchists that I have met, and those anarchist texts that I have been able to get and read, to gather my 'data'. These are, for a number of reasons, mostly from Europe and the United States. The questions

faced by anarchists that I will discuss in this essay come from this context, and the answers will be relevant, if at all, only in that context.

## 12 Anarchists, hegemony, and power

Having suggested what anarchism is about, the next question is: where is anarchism to be found? It is not, to begin with, the same as the globalisation-critical movement (below: globalisation movement), or even the latter's biggest part. However, because many anarchists have been very engaged with this movement, many of the examples used here will be drawn from its mobilisations. Anarchism is also not the same as the by now internationally (in)famous 'Black Bloc',<sup>9</sup> although some of the voices on which I will draw here will emanate from under a balaclava. *Anarchists*, then, should be seen as a 'submerged network' of groups, people and identities (Melucci 1989), as a counter-community (Gemie 1994) that gets involved in mobilisations (e.g. against the International Monetary Fund [IMF]) and tactics (e.g. the black bloc), but does not exhaust itself in these: the subcultures where people are attempting to construct different ways of life, that centre around cafes and squats, groups and individuals, that can be found in Berlin or London, Malaga or Stockholm, that is where anarchists and therefore anarchism can be found.

Anarchism might today be back on the agenda after some decades in the political wilderness, but its existence is far from trouble-free, with challenges coming from the 'outside', from the engagement with dominant structures of power, as well as from the inside, in terms of the ability to sustain itself as a subculture/movement. The first of these problems is that, from Seattle to Genoa, and now to the 'war on terror', anarchists have found themselves at the receiving end of rapidly escalating state repression without having any effective mechanisms to defend themselves against this onslaught. Linked to this policy of repression is the challenge of co-optation of more moderate groups within the globalisation movement, leaving anarchists isolated on the radical fringes. Finally, the last problem is demonstrated by the fact that there is hardly anyone over 30 who is interested in anarchism.<sup>10</sup> In other words: the anarchist subculture is plagued by its inability to sustain participation, by its limited size and mobilisation capacities, its social isolation, and the vulnerability to repression that this produces.

These political challenges have been widely discussed within anarchist circles, and many proposed solutions have emerged, most of which can be summarised under two headings: they focus on the need to firstly overcome the isolation of the anarchist/left-libertarian subculture (*extensive organising*), and secondly to deepen that subculture's political and social structures so as to strengthen its capacity of maintaining participation; or simply: to allow for people above, say, 29 to live an 'anarchist' life (*intensive organising*).<sup>11</sup>

Today's anarchists are obviously not the first radical force encountering the problem of how to maintain its strength over time and in the face of attacks, and how to grow beyond its current strength. About eighty years ago, the Italian

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Communist Party's strategist Antonio Gramsci asked himself the same question - and came up with an analysis of structures of power in advanced capitalism that I believe make him an important touchstone for any project of resistance operating under such conditions. His starting point was: why did the revolution succeed in Russia, and not in Italy or anywhere else in Western Europe, where classical Marxism had predicted it would be more likely to occur due to the more advanced development of capitalism? He argued that the reason for this failure was an incorrect understanding of the workings of power in modern capitalism: while Marxist revolutionary practice had assumed that political power was concentrated in the state apparatus, Gramsci suggested that power also rested in the institutions of 'civil society' (Gramsci 1971: 210-276), or the structures and organisation of everyday life. The revolution would therefore have to aim not only at conquering state power, but much more importantly, to create an alternative civil society, which would have to be able to attract the majority of people by convincing them of the validity of the project, which was in turn premised on its ability to perform 'all the activities and functions inherent in the organic development of a society' (Ibid: 16). This alternative society has come to be referred to as a 'counter-hegemony',<sup>12</sup> a term I would translate as 'sustainable communities of resistance'. The key to Gramsci's analysis therefore was the suggestion that the organisation of resistance would somehow have to mirror the structures of power.

What is the relevance of this to anarchist practice? First of all, Gramsci's alternative society would involve both extensive and intensive political organising, as suggested in the proposals cited above: to extend the appeal of anarchism/communism by opening up to other groups and individuals,<sup>13</sup> and to increase the sustainability of the anarchist/communist subculture by strengthening its social functions. There is, however, a major problem involved in transporting this concept into anarchist practice: Gramsci was a Leninist, and as such did not really have a problem with an anti-capitalist strategy that entailed hierarchies both internally and externally. It was in essence setting one power up against another. This clearly creates a problem for anarchists, if we understand anarchism as the struggle against all forms of hierarchies and power. If a) a strategy of counter-hegemony, of building sustainable communities of resistance, is in essence a strategy of power, and if b) anarchism is understood as rejecting all forms of power, and c) the strategy outlined here in the crudest terms (internal and external expansion) is necessary to sustain the radical project of anarchism, have we then not reached the end of anarchism as a political project? Is anarchism as the rejection of hierarchies and power dead because it needs hierarchies and power in order to survive?

## II ANARCHISM, PARTS 1 AND 2

### II 1 No power for no-one!

The question therefore becomes, is anarchism really the rejection of all forms of

power? The obvious difficulty with this question lies in the word 'really': for if it is true that anarchism is not a unified body of theory but a set of practices, it might be quite difficult to figure out anything that anarchism 'really' is. A look at any flyer written by an anarchist group will usually reveal the coexistence of a variety of conceptual positions, some of which may even be mutually contradictory. In order to pick apart the various 'strands' existing in anarchist discourse, then, it will be necessary to engage after all with anarchism as a historically created set of practices, that is: to critically analyse the various ideas and discourses that have shaped today's practices.

Anarchism developed to some extent both parallel and in opposition to Marxism, and some of its guiding principles can best be illustrated as a critique of Marxist theory. The latter argued that all oppression fundamentally derived from one source, that is, control of the means of production. It was therefore able to suggest that, if the proletariat were to first seize the reins of the state (which was held to be a mere support-structure for capitalist class power) and then to socialise the means of production in one fell swoop, it could offer a deliverance from all forms of oppression. For Marxism, there was only one enemy, one struggle, and one final and complete victory. In response, anarchists argued that oppression flowed not only from control of the means of production, but also from control of the means of physical coercion - in other words, the state was a centre of power whose interests were not fully reducible to those of 'capital' (Miller 1984: 47-49). This created a problem for anarchism, as its identification of at least two enemies, capital and the state (and frequently the church as well (Marshall 1992: 4-5)), splintered the political field, creating difficulties in terms of a) who was the privileged agent of revolution, and b) how could this revolution be made in one go if there were so many centres of power, so many enemies, so many struggles. The first question had been easy to answer for Marxism, or any analysis that operated with the notion that there is one main/central source of social conflict, because the oppressed part in that relationship (concretely: the proletariat in the labour-capital relation) becomes the necessary agent of revolution, but difficult for an analysis that identified a diffusion of power centres. Similarly, for such a position, the answer to the second question apparently had to be: 'not at all'.

One strand of anarchism, probably the one most identified with dead white males like Bakunin, Kropotkin and Proudhon, responded to this shattering of the unity of power/oppression and the subsequent diffusion of struggles by simply reconstituting the unity of power on a higher level. Where previously the contradiction between capital and labour was paramount, the new key contradiction became one between a benign human nature/society and an unequivocally bad logic of oppression merely *manifesting* itself in different structures of power (capitalism, the state, religion) (Marshall 1992: 4). This assumption at the core of what I will call the 'classical' strand of anarchism has important politico-theoretical implications: having posited a pure human essence in a constant struggle against forces that seek to oppress it, the possibility for anarchist practice leading to a

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*total* liberation from power after some sort of revolution is maintained. This conclusion is based on a conception of power as being external to human essence, as coming from institutions that impose themselves on an organically free humanity (Newman 2001: 37).

And indeed, many of today's anarchists directly refer back to this dichotomous view of society when making political statements. In an essay written on the protests in Genoa, Moore asserts that for anarchists, 'power (be it economic or governmental) is the problem - not who holds it - and needs, therefore, to be overcome altogether' (Moore 2001: 137). And to show that this question does not just manifest itself in the writings of anarchists, but also in practice: at a meeting at the largely anarchist-inspired 'No Border Camp' in Strasbourg in July 2002, I witnessed a discussion about how to organise the set-up of toilets for the camp, where one speaker suggested that the question of who cleans the toilets was merely a 'technical' question. This may sound trivial, but if one considers that who cleans the toilets is very much a question of power, and therefore political rather than technical (whether it is the untouchables in India, or low-waged women both at their jobs and at home, it is almost always the oppressed who clean the toilets), then this argument must be seen as the articulation of a view that understands 'power' to reside only out there/up there, but not inside anarchism, with its privileged links to a naturally solidaristic human essence.

### II 2 Anarchism, part 2: multi-sited power, and power among anarchists

This 'classical' strand, however, is far from being the only or true anarchism. Above, I identified a crucial question for anarchists: how to respond to the diffusion of power centres that the critique of Marxism had led to? On the face of it, there is only one alternative to the answer given by the classical anarchists, namely to give up the ideas of a unity of struggles (against oppression) and of the revolution as one single, cataclysmic event. This, however, was a conclusion few - none to my knowledge - were willing to draw, and so an emerging second 'open' strand busied itself with introducing 'new' (or rather: newly recognised) centres of power/oppression. For example, Emma Goldman added the oppression of women by men/patriarchy (particularly within the institution of the (bourgeois) family) to the anarchist canon (Marshall 1992: 5); later, Murray Bookchin brought an awareness of the environmental consequences of industrial capitalism to the anarchist worldview (Bookchin 1989).

The upshot of all this activity was a challenge to the classical view of one top and one bottom in society, suggesting a more decentralised understanding of power, which resulted in a picture of 'a series of tops and bottoms' (May 1994: 49). Whereas the classical view, even if it suggested a diversity of actual centres of power, usually resulted in the privileging of one social group as the authentic agent of revolutionary change - whether it was the working class, as Proudhon at some point held, or Bakunin's celebration of the 'great rabble' of urban centres

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(Gemie 1994: 355; Newman 2001: 30) - the image of a multitude of at least *potentially* equally important sites of struggle implies that no single group can claim that their fight is *necessarily* more important than others (Laclau and Mouffe 2001).<sup>14</sup> This open strand of anarchism can therefore be summarised as opposing 'capitalism, inequality (including the oppression of women by men), sexual repression, militarism, war, authority, and the state' (Goodway 1989: 2).<sup>15</sup> Note that this seemingly abstract debate has crucial political implications: the question of whether a left-libertarian counter-hegemony should ultimately focus on the working class - a view expressed for example in the influential pamphlet 'Give up activism' (Anonymous2 2000a, 2000b) - is politically relevant, since it will determine which groups will become the focus of a political mobilisation.

As with the classical strand, it is easy to point to examples of such an understanding of power as multi-sited in contemporary anarchists' statements: in a critique of the activities of 'authoritarian socialist' groups during and after the mobilisations in Seattle, an activist writes that anarchists 'want freedom from all forms of oppression and domination, including organisations that want to think and represent and act for us' (Anonymous6 2000: 128). Similarly, the newly formed anarchist network People's Global Action (PGA) - which emerged primarily as a co-ordinator of global mobilisations against elite-summits but is now broadening its focus - states in its 'hallmarks' that seek to express its political philosophy that, in addition to being an anti-capitalist network, '[w]e reject all forms and systems of domination and discrimination including, but not limited to, patriarchy, racism and religious fundamentalism of all creeds' (PGA undated). And finally, in keeping with a strong tradition of anarchism, the critique of power is here extended to encompass not only structures of power that are seemingly on the 'outside' of resistance, but also power that exists within anti-oppressive struggles. To highlight this, let me return to the discussion about who cleans the toilets at the activist camp in Strasbourg. The conception of power as multi-sited and also existing in the spaces of resistance is expressed by the response to the first speaker: 'No', the next discussant opined, 'it is a political question' - that is, it involves power.

### III WHITHER ANARCHISM?

#### III 1 Oppressive anarchists

There are then (at least) two different views of power within anarchism - so what? Ordinarily, I would not quarrel with activists about what might seem to be a dispute about the 'correct' understanding of power. However, this is not about correct theory, but about the very visible effects that these different views of power have in political work, both internally and externally. I have already pointed to the possible privileging of one social group as the proper agent of revolution, and in this section would like to deepen the critique. My contention is this: the view of power as external/opposed to some sort of 'human nature' has directly oppressive

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effects, as it serves to obscure the domination of one group of people/activists over another.

Let me begin by illustrating my contention with a contemporary example. In a comment about gender-relations on so-called 'protest sites' (forest-sites occupied by activists in order to prevent their clearcutting for 'development' projects), a female activist begins by suggesting that the 'overall concept of a [protest] camp is one of a free society' - in keeping with the classical strand of anarchism. In reality, however, she points out that such camps become 'a patriarchy-dominated environment.' Specifically, this occurs in the field of sexual relations, where the discourse of free love (which is said to exist in a free society) ended up putting 'a certain amount of pressure [on women] to conform to the free love ideal, and not everyone wants such relations' (Anonymous 1998: 10, 12). What becomes clear here is that the idea of power as being external to human nature, expressing itself in the expectation that women could now, being liberated in the free space of the camp, finally conform to the ideal of free love, had become oppressive in itself: it put pressure on women to conform to the ideal of what the 'human essence' is, to live up to an ideal they never constructed.

### III 2 Open anarchism - open, yes, but going where?

So anarchist practice can in itself be oppressive, or at least entail relations of power, especially if that power is masked behind the idea of a possible power-free practice. But, one might wonder, what's the difference between the two 'strands' in this? After all, even if the open strand has a more subtle view of a multiplicity of centres of power, it still opposes these centres of power to some grouping of social forces, organised in a what Gemie calls a 'counter-community', arrayed against the state (Gemie 1994: 353) - and in this community, a power-free practice could, presumably, develop. It appears that there is no real difference then: both strands claim to be able to 'really' get rid of power.

There is, however, an important difference, a difference which will prove crucial in determining the further political development of each of these strands, and, I believe, of anarchism itself. As shown above, the view of anarchism as power-free practice, or at least as containing the possibility thereof, is an inherent and necessary component of the classical strand; the open strand, however, carried through to its logical conclusion, actually *makes the belief in a power-free practice impossible*. The argument starts again with and against Marxism: the latter posits the 'unity in the relations of power' as its defining criterion (Holloway 2001: 40). There might be two forces struggling, but there is only one real power-centre that has to be conquered. As shown, anarchism originally opened up that monism to suggest the existence of two or three power centres. While the classical strand then proceeded to reduce these centres back into one (the 'logic' of power or oppression), the second strand maintained this openness, leading to the proliferation of centres of power described above: from two, to three, to five, to ... a multitude.

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All's well thus far. But what happens now? Apparently, the diffusion of power centres that results from the original breaking of the monism has no logical endpoint, and does not even stop at the integrity of the individual that some anarchists value so highly: even a person who is oppressed on several counts (homosexuality, femininity) will be an oppressor on others (upper class, white). Therefore, flowing logically from the premises of the second strand, and from the political logic thus implied (no struggle is *necessarily* worth more than another), we get a picture of power relations criss-crossing all of society, penetrating even ourselves as subjects. Given this diffusion of power into our very own being, the conclusions must be that: a) one cannot continue to think revolution as a one-off event, since that implies the existence of one or only a small number of centres of power. If power is also embedded in value structures as the example of patriarchy on site demonstrates, then 'revolution' must be seen as a process, since it is clearly impossible to 'revolutionise' values and attitudes from one day to the next<sup>16</sup>; and b) we cannot escape power, because every human relation involves (but is not exclusively constituted by) power relations, and thus power 'over' someone. Therefore, power is everywhere.

### III 3 From open anarchism to post-structuralist anarchism

Having thus shown power as inescapable, we are faced with another point where anarchism could simply self-destruct, as its original project - the emancipation from all forms of hierarchies and power - seems to have become a theoretical and practical impossibility. However, this is where post-structuralist analysis can come in helpful, in order to, as it were, think open anarchism to its logically *and* politically necessary conclusions. I do not so much seek to prove that anarchism and post-structuralism are compatible and even likely theoretical allies - that has been done<sup>17</sup> - but rather to understand how post-structuralism and anarchism can be practical allies, how post-structuralist analysis can be used to advance anarchist practice, and vice versa.

The point of departure for this discussion will be the end of the last: power is everywhere. But for anarchists, there is still that dualism of oppression vs. power-free practice that seems to contradict that conclusion. The work of Michel Foucault might offer us a way out of this dilemma.<sup>18</sup> But wait - isn't Foucault a 'postmodernist'? Doesn't that mean that he is essentially a petty-bourgeois nihilist, who, having deconstructed everything ends up with nothing to hold on to? As I will show below, this criticism, voiced frequently both by academics and activists,<sup>19</sup> is nothing but the theoretical equivalent of the familiar branding of anarchists as brainless 'rent-a-mob'-types with no positive proposals. Believing this to be something of a slander, I would caution against such a wholesale rejection of post-structuralist analysis.

Post-structuralism developed at a historical juncture in some ways not unlike that where anarchism emerged as a distinct political movement. While the latter

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emerged in response to its critique of Marxism as a potentially oppressive practice (Miller 1984: 79-93; Joll 1969), which led to the split in the First International, the period during which post-structuralism developed also saw the emergence of the anarchist-inspired student movement of 1968 in France (Bookchin 1989; Marshall 1992: 539-557), and both the professors and the students struggled against an ossified, oppressive French Communist Party (PCF), in practice and in theory: one of Foucault's key concerns was to challenge the intellectual blockade on progressive thinking that the PCF had established on the basis of its claim that it alone held the key to a true understanding of the workings of capitalism, and therefore also to its ultimate overthrow. In particular, it was the question of interment in the Soviet Gulags that could not be discussed openly, suggesting that Marxism as a practice involved a number of unanalysed (and unanalysable) forms of oppression (Foucault 1980: 109-10) - a critique that closely mirrors early anarchist critiques of Marxism, in particular Bakunin's scathing condemnation of Marxism's inherent scientific elitism: 'As soon as an *official truth* is pronounced [...], a truth proclaimed and imposed on the whole world from the summit of the Marxist Sinai, why discuss anything?' (in Miller 1984: 80<sup>20</sup>).

Foucault's key critique of Marxism related to the way the knowledge claims inherent in Marxism are structured: that there is a reality out there, which is hidden under appearances (e.g. the oppression of the worker as reality is hidden under the appearance of alienation and commodity fetishism). Given that there is then one 'true' reality, it must be possible to gain knowledge of that reality, of course only after having absorbed the 'proper' doctrine of Marxism-Leninism. Foucault came to view the 'truth claims' made from this position, i.e.: the PCF knows the 'true' nature of the situation, while those that are not sufficiently steeped in theory cannot know the truth - all eternal truth claims, in fact - as fundamentally oppressive, because they immediately introduce hierarchies: I know, and you don't. Therefore, I am more powerful than you. 'Knowledge', that is the claim to know what 'really' is, is then a form of power (Foucault 1980: 132-3). But, as suggested above, this is nothing particularly new, given that Bakunin already made similar claims. Foucault's fundamental insight was that knowledge of the outside world (e.g. of the fact that there 'is' a political struggle out there, that patriarchy is a 'reality') is also what enables us to act politically, to act at all. Therefore, he came to see power not only as repressive, but also as productive, and began to look not only at the constraining effects of power, but also its 'productive effectiveness, its strategic usefulness, its positivity' (Foucault 1990: 86). Foucault's focus of analysis was therefore not a set of power relations structured in the familiar top-bottom-mode (whether one or many tops, although he did not deny that power relations were always structured unevenly), but power as a web, a 'multiplicity of force relations' without tops or bottoms, and as 'the process, which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them' (Foucault 1990: 92-94).

So, how does that link to anarchism? It allows us for example to understand

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the situation on the above-mentioned protest camp: Foucault suggests that the view of power as fundamentally repressive, and therefore opposed to something that can be called ‘truth’ (or ‘anarchism’, or a ‘free society’), is actually one of the key methods of maintaining certain relations of power, for it allows them to be hidden behind the mask of their being the ‘opposite’ of power (Foucault 1990: 86). In our example, anarchy as ‘non-power’ is merely a facade behind which certain groups of activists (the more experienced ones; the ones with more knowledge; men) hide their power. In turn, a Foucauldian analysis would understand the ability of the protest site’s anonymous critic to deploy her argument as enabled by her having access to the knowledge necessary to write and disseminate her piece: if all truth claims are products of power, then the truth claims made by feminist analysis must be as well. ‘Patriarchy’ is then nothing that exists as a category *before* feminists constructed it, but was created in order to use it to alter the power relations between genders, by creating the ‘absence of freedom for women’ as a lack felt by women (‘freedom’ again being a category that does not pre-exist its social construction), which can then become the source of emancipatory activity.<sup>21</sup> The upshot: a post-structuralist analysis radicalises anarchism as a critique of power relations by extending it into the very field of resistance. Whereas anarchism had previously viewed the existence of power relations within spaces of resistance as simply an aberration (e.g. Anonymous5 2001; Levine 1984), thus keeping open the possibility of a privileged place of freedom which anarchist practice could potentially reach, we have now arrived at a picture where a practice of resistance itself must be viewed as establishing a (or altering an existing) power relation. From power being everywhere by default to power being everywhere by necessity.

### IV POST-STRUCTURALIST ANARCHISM, POWER AND IDENTITY

Having now understood any form of resistance as a form of power, where does this leave us? Do we have to give up resisting, simply because any statement to the effect that people are oppressed presupposes a power relation? This seems like a valid conclusion: even if we take power to be productive of our every action, and therefore unavoidable, we could still argue that it is necessary to minimise the power we exert over *others*. One way of doing this would be by avoiding the construction of common identities between people who would then engage in social struggle as a collective force.

But let me backtrack for a moment: where did this ‘identity’-question suddenly appear from? As I suggested above, the claims of feminists that all women in the world are oppressed by a power-structure of patriarchy involved an attempt to restructure power relations between genders: the attempt to construct an identity common to all women by telling women that they *ought* to feel oppressed (because of course, in ‘reality’ they are), and that they therefore *ought* to struggle against this oppression, the attempt to create a political identity under the leadership of those who construct it. As Laclau and Mouffe put it: ‘hegemonic articulations

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retroactively create the interests they claim to represent' (2001: xi). This is not to minimise or ridicule the oppression of women - only to suggest that political strategies that aim to mobilise people for a struggle against this oppression involve attempts to construct collective identities, and therefore the establishment of power relations. And in turn, the strategies ask those who will have been successfully mobilised into this new collective identity, whether it is called 'global sisterhood', 'the people', or 'the working class', to attempt to alter their power relations with those who are seen as oppressors. In short: politics is about the construction of collective identities as the basis for action, and therefore about power. The question now is quite simple: do we think that engaging in politics is still a good idea, or not?

### IV 1 Post-structuralist anarchism as non-political non-politics?

I will focus on the work of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, whose work - influential and controversial in Germany, as exemplified by his public clashes with Jürgen Habermas - has been receiving increasing attention outside of his home country as well.<sup>22</sup> Sloterdijk, in a typical post-structuralist move, first elaborates a very forceful critique of the power-relations inherent in attempts to construct political identities, and then takes precisely the step that I hope to avoid: from a critique of politics to the abdication of politics. Starting with the assertion that knowledge has been revealed today as (a claim to) power, and 'truth' as merely strategy, he defines his project as carrying to a conclusion the task of the enlightenment, that is, the exposure of power by dismantling the facades it hides behind (Sloterdijk 1983: 12, 18). In terms of placing post-structuralism in general and Sloterdijk in particular in a relation to anarchism, this is quite significant: anarchism can similarly be said to be an attempt at a conclusion of the enlightenment project (taking his definition), for it radicalised the critique of power put forth first by enlightenment liberalism, and then Marxism, to extend to all realms of life.<sup>23</sup> The final battle the enlightenment has yet to win, Sloterdijk suggests, is to expose the power hiding behind the notion of identity, to expose the ego, or subject, as constructed (Sloterdijk 1983: 131-2). Tracing the construction of a bourgeois class identity (and the somewhat less successful attempt to construct a positive working class-identity), Sloterdijk reveals these to have been political projects, altering and establishing relations of power by creating the very political force the leaders claimed to represent (Ibid: 133-54).

Politics, therefore, becomes a struggle between identities and power-knowledges: any mobilisation around any political topic, however anarchistic or progressive, necessarily involves not 'essences' (as in: we are all *essentially* oppressed workers), but the construction of 'a new knowledge-power and the creation of a new subject of power-knowledge.'<sup>24</sup> It is against this background that Sloterdijk's enlightenment struggles to break open 'the frozen identities,' celebrating against this necessary product of politics an 'existential anti-politics' that would

seek to reject all attempts at identifying us, to break through the disciplinary mechanisms that make us conform to a particular view of what we should do, and how we should be. Because: 'politics is, when people try to smash each others' heads in' (Ibid: 250; 315-319). Sloterdijk identifies his (non)strategy to achieve this as 'kynicism': an attempt to break through social conditionings/disciplinary mechanisms by physically asserting our ability to enjoy life in spite of these conditionings - for example, he cites with great joy the example of Diogenes, who countered Plato's learned lectures on the 'Eros' by publicly masturbating on Athens's market square. Kynicism would never involve the construction of new identities, because all identities are disciplining, normalising, shaming: it would rather be seeking an 'actual' ('*eigentlich*' - as opposed to constructed, '*uneigentlich*') experience of life, which we can reach not through politics - Sloterdijk does quite clearly assert that his struggle is 'about life, not about changing history' (Ibid: 242) - but rather in 'love and sexual rapture, in irony and laughter, creativity and responsibility, meditation and ecstasy' (Ibid.: 390).

So where does Sloterdijk's (non)politics, which I will treat as representative for any tendency of anarchism and post-structuralism that moves from the critique of politics to abandoning politics, leave us? With, I would suggest, a number of glaring inconsistencies. The first and probably most damaging to Sloterdijk's position is the fact that even his non-politics are necessarily embedded in power relations, and are thus political. In order either to withdraw from 'established society' or to physically defy social disciplinary mechanisms, one has to have a good amount of privileges: many anarcho-activists who are today on the dole tend to forget that this dole is the result of the state skimming off some of the surplus value produced by workers, either in their own countries, or in another; to establish a commune requires at least both intellectual and financial resources (skills and money), which are the product of power; and finally, while Sloterdijk's Diogenes may very well have masturbated and shit on the Athenian marketplace with a good deal of public success, we can assume that a person who has been defined by the authorities as 'mad', or 'homeless' would not have any effect with such an action, besides getting arrested, or worse, ignored. True, Prof. Sloterdijk's public masturbation would surely have an interesting 'kynic' effect, but that presupposes the very position he has achieved (chair of a department at a German university) as a result of power. Kynicism, or any apparently non-political 'non-practice' (Ibid: 939-53) that aims to avoid politics in order to avoid power, thus makes the old mistake of ignoring the power relations it is itself based on and that help produce it as a practice. In other words: to try to bypass power relations is to reaffirm them, and to deny yourself the ability to do anything about them.

The second criticism is linked to the first, but not identical: having affirmed that power is unavoidable, I will now argue that 'identity' - that is, a more or less conscious inside/outside-distinction - is simply a general condition of communication and social existence, and not only is it unavoidable (by default), but enabling and necessary. Sloterdijk, however, has already anticipated this move:

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he asserts that the desire to dive back constantly into new identifications once an old one is shattered is itself part of a more fundamental 'programming' of ourselves, where we come to think of our subjectivity as necessarily linked to an identity. In addition, to state that such a tendency exists is identified by Sloterdijk as an exercise of 'master-knowledge', which deviously suggests that most people would rather have more security than freedom, a position that in turn leads to claims to representing these 'poor people', to exercising power over them, to domination (Ibid: 155-6, 348). Again, in these seemingly esoteric questions we are not as far away from actual anarchist practice as it may seem: the pamphlet 'Give up Activism' recently demanded of left-libertarians that their politics should involve not the construction of new identities, but the breaking open of old ones (especially that of the 'activist') and the creation of a situation of fundamental openness for the expression of what can maybe be called a 'non-identitarian identity' (Anonymous2: 2000a).

Three arguments can be deployed against this view. First, that in arguing that any claim to identity is oppressive and therefore concluding that it is the 'essence' of human freedom not to be tied to any identity, Sloterdijk has shot over his target. He has constructed a new 'identity' or human essence, that of the person who seeks to constantly escape his/her being forced into an identity. The necessary implication of this is that any search for 'sameness', community, for collective identity is the expression of the 'deep programming' identified above, and therefore not 'essentially' free and human. From this follows directly that anyone who does not constantly seek to break through identities, to constantly redefine him-/herself *ought* to change his or her behaviour, and conform to the standards set down by Sloterdijk - or the author of 'Give up Activism'. Clearly, this claim to knowledge of a human 'essence' becomes yet another form of hierarchy-building, with those who constantly escape identity at the top, and those who do not at the bottom. Having deconstructed all essences, we are back with a new essence, this time a hyper-mobile one.<sup>25</sup> On the side, it appears that the practice of social 'hyper-mobility' is, somewhat like Sloterdijk's kynicism, premised on a whole lot of resources to maintain such a life: in other words, it is a strategy of the privileged.

The second argument against hyper-mobility is of course precisely the one Sloterdijk anticipated: that humans need identity. Let me start with the example of language. It seems clear that we understand ourselves to some extent in and through the use of language - Sloterdijk's arguments were, after all, expressed in German. Language being a powerful element in the construction of collective identities, Sloterdijk is evidently also caught in an identity: not that of 'a German', but of a German-language speaker. How is this an identity? Quite simply insofar as it defines a group of 'ins' or a 'we' (those who speak a language) and of 'outs' or 'them/the others' (those who do not). In other words: writing is based on language, language on identity, identity on power, suggesting that if we at all try to communicate we are already involved in the construction of collective identities (Lyotard 1984: 15), and therefore Sloterdijk cannot consistently claim to have escaped power and

identity in his non-political non-practice.

But, one could claim here, maybe it is possible to construct identities that at least do not involve the disciplining/normalising that (usually?) goes with identities, which leads to the third and final critique of non-political non-practice: not only is identity necessarily exclusive, as shown above, it is also undesirable not to have any form of disciplining mechanism in a society: from an anarchist point of view, for example, sexist behaviour is not a matter of legitimately asserting one's difference, but rather simply unacceptable and oppressive. Therefore, one would have to create social structures, or disciplining mechanisms, that would prevent sexist behaviour from developing, and if it developed, there would have to be mechanisms to deal with that. In other words: even the most perfect anarchist community needs disciplining - anything else would imply everyone's freedom to do anything, no matter that such actions might or be oppressive towards others. It is therefore one thing to make a theoretical claim to 'true' radicalism by proclaiming the desirability of non-identity based on the argument that identities are oppressive and disciplining (a point that is not even theoretically coherent, as shown above), and another to construct radical political spaces that seek to put into practice what anarchism and post-structuralism are all about: ongoing critiques of power and oppression.

#### IV 2 Anarchism, power and hegemony - take two

I suggest that the arguments developed above can be used to expose even the most dedicatedly non-hierarchical practice as necessarily involving relations of power, even, and especially, if it claims to go beyond traditional politics and hierarchies. To illustrate this point, I will look at a practice that is increasingly widespread among contemporary anarchists: to structure political meetings in such a way that decisions can only be reached by consensus. The argument for this organisational model ('consensus model')<sup>26</sup> is fairly straightforward: having long ago dismissed representative democracy as oppressive, some anarchists began to criticise *any* structure that involves voting as unacceptable, arguing that it necessarily entails the oppression of a minority by a majority, and privileges those with the means to create a majority (i.e. those with experience, rhetorical skills, etc.). As a result, it was suggested that only decisions that were consensual were legitimate, because that way it would be assured that no one was oppressed.

What are the assumptions behind this organisational model? First of all, that in the absence of oppressive structures and processes, people naturally tend towards a consensus - for if they did not, then a structure where everyone was optimally free to express themselves would rather lead to dissent (and the going assumption among anarchists is that employing the consensus model will, at least in the longer run, *not* lower the effectiveness of decision-making). This view, in turn, can only rest on the belief, held by both strands of anarchism, that once all oppressive structures are removed, we can all meet in a power-free practice of free deliberation,

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which - since we are all *essentially* the same - will necessarily lead to consensus. The model is therefore premised on the ideas of the possibility of non-power and a shared 'free' human essence/identity, both of which have been rejected above. As Koch points out: since every statement forming the basis of a consensus can ultimately be shown to be a subjective statement without any absolute truth value, 'consensual politics is reduced to an expression of power' (Koch 1993: 345; also Laclau and Mouffe 2001: xviii). Lyotard goes so far as to refer to any attempt at overcoming the inherent heterogeneity of opinions and positions in a search for a consensus as 'terroristic' (Lyotard 1984: 66).

What are the practical implications of this? When applied, the consensus-model has led to a shift of power, away from majorities dominating minorities, to unelected hierarchies of knowledge-, skill-, and time-endowed and -empowered people. Imagine this situation: a meeting aiming at consensus is convened. The goal is to agree on what actions to take at a demonstration the next day. Since there are no structured hierarchies, everyone is free to speak their minds. During the discussion that follows, a) those with most knowledge of demonstration-matters will dominate; b) men will (usually) dominate; c) those with time at their disposal will dominate; d) those most dedicated will dominate, since the others can not be bothered to sit around for hours on end. Ultimately, a group of male, long-time activists, probably without any other pressing engagements, who are very dedicated to their cause, will make a proposal, and about half of those still present will agree, the others simply won't bother to register their opinion. Victory by attrition, power by default - and a power more insidious than that of structured groups, because it cannot easily be challenged in the meeting: after all, it doesn't officially exist.<sup>27</sup> Or with Max Weber: to replace majority voting with consensus is not to abolish authority - merely to replace the 'legal-rational', that is, codified and structured authority of the majority with the 'charismatic' authority (popularity) of some individuals (Weber 1964: 151, 159).

### IV 3 From consensus to hegemony

Having suggested that the consensus-model is far from the ideal mode of organisation it is often claimed to be, the practical question for anarchists is now: how do we organise our meetings, and - on a somewhat grander scale - what does all this deconstruction of power, identity and what-not imply for our political practice? Since the critique of the consensus model does not entail a refutation of the critique of majority voting, the return to that organisational model is blocked. Another possible way out of the problem could be to advocate a society based on small groups that are formed on the basis of a functional need by consenting people, with those who do not agree abstaining from participation (e.g. Levine 1984). Such groups would disband after their function is performed, so as not to become ossified structures of power. However: if anarchist resistance is going to be organised in sustainable communities of resistance, as I suggested

above, then this argument is equally unsatisfactory, since such communities cannot exist solely based on functional agreements, but must entail a level of permanence and solidarity that flows only from the construction of collective identities.<sup>28</sup> This is not to say that functional groups are not important, but rather to maintain that their existence is made possible only by adherence to a common set of values and rules. Again, we return to the inescapability of power and the need to establish rules (disciplining mechanisms) as the basis of a community. This is not to suggest that the consensus-model might not be appropriate for some kinds of activities, just that one has to be aware that consensus can only result from unequal power relations.

One final point before we can deal with the question of an anarchist counter-hegemony: I have suggested that if the arguments above are accepted, and if we also accept the need to establish sustained communities of resistance, then... But the case for the necessity of such communities has not yet been made. In fact, a post-structuralist anarchism could imply a very different conclusion: power, Foucault argued, is in principle dispersed. As a result, so must resistance be. If power is expressed today mostly as the drive towards disciplining/normalisation of people's behaviour, then surely the best thing to do is to resist any such drives towards normalisation; and if power is everywhere, but *domination* is the result of the concentration of such power relations, then any such concentration, with its attendant problems of discipline and normalisation, ought to be avoided, and resistance should take the form of 'dispersed interventions [aimed] at heterogeneous targets' (Foucault 1980: 80). Similarly, Schuermann celebrates 'dispersed and discontinuous offensives' in social struggles (1986: 308). Essentially, a post-structuralist politics is then a micropolitics, based not on large organised struggles and the oppressive potential these necessarily entail, but on decentralised and autonomous actions. Sounds pretty anarchist all right.

However, while power might *in principle* be dispersed, that does not imply that it is *in fact* fully dispersed: some crucial power relations come together to form hegemonic structures of domination (for example the state, or capitalist class power),<sup>29</sup> and as such cannot be fought by a totally decentralised strategy of resistance. The reason for that is simply, as I pointed out above, that fully decentralised resistance cannot withstand frontal attacks; strategies of co-optation; and retain the participation of people over time as they increasingly interact with these hegemonic structures. And finally, such decentralised resistance would have a hard time excluding behaviour that would not be deemed acceptable by anarchists. It is therefore not the case, as May suggests, that resistance should occur in the form of networks without a centre, because that is how oppression is structured (May 1994: 13-4), but rather, because power is also hegemonic, so must resistance be - and we are back with Gramsci. The need for some 'community' of resistance seems therefore clear. This community can only be created through constructing a collective identity, and in the laying down of ground rules that aim to prevent the emergence of behaviours deemed unacceptable - that is, by establishing relations

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of power, and ultimately a counter-hegemony.

### IV 4 The anarchist counter-hegemony as (constrained) heterotopia

Having here attempted to rid anarchism of its fear of power and hegemony, the question remains: what is there left for anarchism to do? Is it simply another hegemonic project, aiming to impose a particular set of ideas of what society should look like on everyone else? Yes and no. Yes, because, since all politics, practices and identities are the product of power, the criterion of whether they are 'power-free' ceases to be a valid yardstick for evaluating them, destroying the traditional justification for anarchism. Anarchism can not lay any claim to transcendental truth/goodness. What can we then use to assert that anarchist practice is 'better' or more acceptable than any other? The answer must be, I believe, that this is ultimately a question of ethics.<sup>30</sup> Most political projects that we can recall involved the attempt to *narrow* difference, to impose one particular identity to the exclusion of others. You *are* German, English, French; you *are* a proletarian; you *are* white; protestant; and so on... Anarchism, on the other hand, ought to be understood as power, yes, but power guided by ethics, by an ethics of *difference*.

How do we arrive at this point, of valuing difference as the goal of political action? Two possible responses to the critique of identity as involving hierarchies have been suggested: a) that we are all fundamentally 'nothing' (that is, there is nothing in us that gives us a specific identity). This position has been rejected as ignoring the necessarily social nature of human existence. b) that we are all fundamentally 'different', and that any social uniformity is simply a streamlining of that fundamental openness and difference (Easterbrook 1997: 68).<sup>31</sup> This statement in turn implies a strategy where resistance is always aimed at crushing attempts to constitute new identities (Schuermann 1986: 308). I have already argued above that this strategy is inconsistent with the political need for a counter-hegemony. However: to say that we 'need' something at a given point is very different from asserting that it is ethically desirable. I will therefore suggest a third possible answer to the critique of identity-as-hierarchy: to accept that fact, and then ask what strategy would be ethically acceptable under these circumstances. This is the last hurdle we have to jump: to show that a strategy of counter-hegemony is not only necessary for the success of a (post-structuralist) anarchist project, but also ethically desirable.

The goal that anarchists seem to be able to agree on is to fight oppression, to celebrate multiplicity, and to break through boundaries of identities, a goal probably best expressed in the celebrated slogan 'one no, many yeses': Jazz, having quoted this slogan, identifies his position as 'the no to capitalism, the yes to diversity, different paths, variety being the spice of life' (Jazz 2001: 85). But: if we follow the argument deployed above against Sloterdijk, that the suggestion that we are all fundamentally different amounts to yet another oppressive construct if we claim it to be 'natural', then difference, too, has to be enabled by

power. If we want a world of difference and variety, what Vattimo calls a 'heterotopia' (1992: 102), then we need to do more than simply theoretically establish its preconditions.<sup>32</sup> In concrete activist work, it is perfectly clear that the establishment of certain rules, i.e. relations of power, is necessary so that difference can flourish, and that oppression and domination can be kept to a minimum. It is ultimately only this insistence on effectively *enabling* (as opposed to merely *allowing*) difference by establishing rules that seek to prevent actions that would limit the ability of everyone to express their identities, that can distinguish anarchism from other political projects.<sup>33</sup>

Admittedly, this is not a watertight distinction, and anarchism will always be located somewhere in-between a stable identity of an anarchist resistance/counter-hegemony and a total openness of identity which post-structuralism claims is necessary for a truly anti-authoritarian project. But ultimately, it is all we can do, since the constitution of a social structure that respects difference can only be the result of the continual enforcement of rules that do not respect *all* differences. This lack of certainty is the fate of all political projects at a time when their 'ultimate foundations' are increasingly shown to be substantially less than ultimate, to be simply grounded in power. Therefore, uncertainty is unavoidable, which leads us to a final necessary conclusion about the shape and foundations of an anarchist counter-hegemony: because anarchism entails relations of power, we have to stop assuming that establishing an anarchist community, even if this were to become socially dominant, would produce some sort of an end of history (the necessary condition for certainty), or at least an end to all social conflict. Rather, Muemken argues that anarchy is not a state of eternal peace, but 'a permanent war' against the resurfacing of oppressive practices and discourses (Muemken 1998: 45). In turn, this links back to the critique of the consensus-model: anarchism is precisely not the continual presence of consensus, but a state of constant disagreement and antagonism between different social forces and ideas (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) - that is, it is variety, Jazz's 'spice of life'. This is consistent with my claim that certain ground rules will need to be established, because, for even if we were able to agree on some basic rules regarding sexism, homophobia, racism and capitalism, we cannot hope to always be in agreement on *every* matter of discussion. Disagreement, war between positions and knowledges, uncertainty, are therefore indispensable in an anarchist project. In this war, May suggests, what we have to remember is to be modest about our claims to truth: the less modesty a claim possesses, the more likely it is to become coercive (1994: 137, 152).

#### V BACK TO THE REAL WORLD: ANARCHIST PRACTICE, HETEROTOPIA, AND COUNTER-HEGEMONY

It is now important to return the discussion to concrete anarchist practices and

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discussions in order to demonstrate that the conclusions elaborated here have to some extent already been drawn by activists, both conceptually and in practice. That is to say that both an understanding of their own practices as power and the attendant modesty, as well as self-consciously 'powerful' attempts to establish counterhegemonic structures are currently visible in anarchist circles.

Let me begin with the 'conceptual' examples, that is, where ideas expressed in writing by anarchist activists resemble those developed here, and therefore imply similar strategies. First, in an essay discussing the use of direct action, an activist points out that direct action and the prefigurative community it is both based on and seeks to create are not necessarily good, because they could involve the exclusion of outsiders. For after all, 'how about a [community] that involves unacknowledged sexism, racism, being of the right class?' (Anonymous11 2001: 137). The writer can never be totally sure that her action is 'good' (an acknowledgement of a loss of ultimate certainties) because they may involve an undue exercise of power over others. Nonetheless, she 'can't remain frozen; even in the midst of that uncertainty I have to act' and accept her fallibility in an exercise of power that is guided by the belief that something is important (Anonymous11 2001: 138). Her right to act, in other words, derives from her ethics, and her activism therefore becomes a conscious relation of power guided by a modest ethics.

In the second example, the author defines the anarchist project as one that aims to construct 'non-hierarchical spaces and free and equal social relations,' but goes on to criticise the exclusionary and homogenising tendencies of the anarchist counterculture (Anonymous1 2001: 551-2). It is argued that anarchists have to abandon the safety that comes with 'relatively closed and homogenous collective identities', which 'undermine the freedom and autonomy of the members of the collective, partially deny people's own particular identities, and introduce risky dynamics of power and leadership.' Rather, they should embrace 'diversity and respect for difference' as a necessary condition for autonomy (Ibid.: 554-5). Having pursued this argument thus far, the author asks: what about 'behaviours, values and ideas that cannot be accepted', especially those whose acceptability is disputed? While some collective values are clearly necessary, the challenge is to give more space to disagreement, which is held to bring creativity and change. Finally, the author calls on anarchists to 'experiment, and improve ways to eliminate all forms and systems of oppression, domination and discrimination within our own circles (while keeping the right to difference and taking precautions against the formation of dominant collective identities)' (Ibid.: 562). While this text mirrors many of the arguments developed above, it clearly does not ultimately reject the notion of a potentially power-free practice. However, since this potential is seen as one contained mostly in the striving, the author is able to criticise both external and internal power relations, and work towards a counterhegemonic structure based on some collective values but aiming for the greatest

possible difference, in other words, on modest values.

And finally, there are also practical examples of anarchists pursuing a strategy that can be called 'counterhegemonic' in the sense discussed here. Three projects come to mind: the PGA; the so-called 'consulta process'; and the 'no-border' camps (the latter I mentioned already in the context of the toilets-&-power-debate). The treatment of these examples will have to remain brief, even skeletal, as they are not intended to fully capture the meaning of these practices, but rather to understand their relation to the theoretical positions I established above.

The PGA,<sup>34</sup> formed in 1998, is a global network of grassroots groups that act in ways consistent with the ground rules set down in the network's 'hallmarks': that build local alternatives to globalisation; reject 'all forms and systems of domination and discrimination'; have a confrontational attitude towards dominant (governmental and economic) structures of power; organise based on principles of decentralisation and autonomy; and that employ methods of direct action and civil disobedience (PGA undated). On the basis of these hallmarks, the network can clearly be said to be anarchist. Supporting this is its 'essentially' anarchist avoidance of claims to representation:<sup>35</sup> it can neither be represented by someone, nor can it represent any persons or groups. As for the formal and informal structures of the PGA, they are limited to a rotating committee of convenors who organise the network's conferences, and an informal 'support group' of self-selected activists who support the convenors in their work. This network can be seen as a significant step in the possible construction of an anarchist counter-hegemony, as it tries to deepen the political linkages between various radical groups in order to strengthen both feelings of collective solidarity, and anarchists' capacity to resist repression, by acting as a tool of communication and co-ordination of radical activities and groups. It is then an example of 'intensive' /internal movement building, based on a set of defined principles that aim for the greatest possible diversity of practices and structures while also creating some limits in terms of what is acceptable.

Secondly, the 'social consulta' is, if anything, even more in flux, so that there is very little concretely to say about what is at best a 'process' and at worst so far only an idea, aiming at the spread of radical democratic practices from the anarchist subculture to other social groups.<sup>36</sup> Since local groups at this early stage of developing the idea have been almost totally 'free' in deciding what they want the consulta to be, disagreement is likely to continue. However, some principles may be distilled from one of the key documents in the debate about what shape the process could take, the 'Internal Consultation Guide' (ICG). It begins by pointing out that, in the face of increased repression, the libertarian left needs to first strengthen its networks, and secondly, 'connect to the rest of society.' The basic element of the consulta process should therefore be local 'popular' assemblies, based, like the PGA, on a set of

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'hallmarks' in order to insure that the consulta remain 'as open, democratic and horizontal as possible'.<sup>37</sup> The consulta can then be said to be an example of extensive/external movement building, since it tries to widen the reach of the anarchists' message and mobilising capacity, while at the same time increasing their public legitimacy. And as for the question of power, following the ICG, this aspect of the anarchist counterhegemonic project even contains an acknowledgement of an act of power in laying down hallmarks in order to ensure difference and diversity.

The final project I will mention here is that of the No Border camps. These have been organised (mostly in Europe) by a loose network of groups campaigning around issues of freedom of movement and immigrant rights. For the purposes of my discussion, however, what is relevant about these camps is not so much the question of immigration but rather the attempt 'to implement a complete vision of the world(s) we're fighting for in the here and now, right down to the smallest details of daily life,' as the 'handbook' to the camp in Strasbourg put it (No Border Camp 2002: 2). Let me begin with this handbook then. Its telling subtitle designates it a 'manual of [intra-camp] geopolitics', a good sign if any of the recognition of the camp's organisation as a matter of power struggles. Further on, the organisers ask that, while discussions about the organisation of the camp should occur, 'the general functioning of the camp should not be called into question', even if the rules this entails 'will neither always convince everybody, nor avoid conflict.' Clearly, the organisers recognise the decisions they had taken as imperfect, but suggest that their acceptance is necessary to allow the camp (an embryonic form of an anarchist sustainable community of resistance) to perform its basic functions. Their call is for all 'to challenge racist, sexist, anti-Semitic and homophobic behaviour, and therefore [the organisers] expect everyone to make sure such attitudes find no room' in the camp (Ibid.). The fact that it is so openly acknowledged that the rules laid down here are an ultimately arbitrary (but ethically motivated) exercise of power, taken together with the essay on direct action discussed above, suggests that it is the practical implementation of an anarchist project in community with others that is more likely to produce this 'post-structuralist' awareness, or simply 'modesty', than other forms of practice (writing, organisation-building...). The reason for this appears to be that while it is possible to argue *in theory* for a power-free practice, any self-conscious anarchist practice will in reality turn out to be about power relations - a conclusion that is forced onto activists by anarchists' strong and salutary tendency to see oppression and domination everywhere, and to attack it vigorously. It takes only one hour-long meeting during which one's supposedly power-free proposal is ripped to shreds by people arguing that it oppresses women, newcomers, older people, physically challenged people, immigrants, or whomever, for the realisation to hit home that nothing one could ever say would be devoid of power.

## VI EPILOGUE: ANARCHISTS, MODEST AND UNCERTAIN - BUT STILL COUNTERHEGEMONIC?

The Strasbourg camp accommodated between two and three thousand activists over a period of over one week. In spite of massive disagreements, it represented a very successful example of anarchist living involving a large number of people, who developed bonds of solidarity based on common principles that allowed them to organise anarchistically the very details of everyday life - even who cleans the toilets: in the end, a functional group of volunteers was formed to do so. The camp operated under the constant threat (and fact) of police repression, and nonetheless managed to make some (albeit limited) contact with groups of illegal immigrants - although contact-building with Strasbourg locals seemed, at least from my vantage point, woefully limited. The camp was certainly not perfect - but then, today's anarchism can no longer claim to be. All it can do is to try to create spaces and relations where domination and oppression are kept to a minimum.

As I have suggested above, this type of political modesty must ultimately flow from an acceptance of the unavoidability of power. The fundamental uncertainty this introduces into anarchists' political actions might be disconcerting at first, but can be used productively to recognise that all our politics are guided by our ethics, and that ethics, not historical truth or destiny, become the essence of political work. While there might be many who draw comfort from the belief that - as an anarchist graffiti put it - 'in the end, we will win' and the sense of historical mission, truth, and inevitability it implies, surely we all realise in our daily political work that there is no historical inevitability in anything political: mobilising means appealing to, and changing, people's perceptions of what is good and bad. Their ethics, in short.

From there, I have argued, it is only a short step towards accepting the necessity and ethical desirability of a strategy of an anarchist counter-hegemony, or the creation of sustainable communities of resistance. Projects such as the PGA, the consulta, or the No Border camps suggest that there are people actively trying to construct such communities. In doing so, they will always have to return to the fundamental uncertainty of political organising today, to find a route that negotiates between two types of oppression: that of too few rules/identities, and that of too many. This might not sound like too much of a political project, which seem somehow always to need certainty. But at a time when the project of neoliberalism is having obviously disastrous consequences; where social democracy is in a coma, if it hasn't quite kicked the bucket yet; where fascists and proto-fascists are on the rise; and the authoritarian left cannot mobilise sufficient resistance; this uncertain and modest post-structuralist anarchism seems to be our best shot at a new emancipatory project.<sup>38</sup> In it, a movement (anarchism) found an analysis (post-structuralism) found a strategy (counter-hegemony) found a movement... An uncertain synthesis, I admit. But uncertainty, maybe even more so than variety, is after all the real spice of life.

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### FURTHER READING:

#### 1. About post-structuralist anarchism:

For beginners: May, T. (2000), 'Poststructuralist Anarchism: An Interview with Todd May', *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory* 4 (2): available at <http://flag.blackened.net/ias/8may.htm> (accessed 15/7/02).

See also:

Newman, S. (2001) *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Lexington Books.

May, T. (1994) *The Political Philosophy of Post-structuralist Anarchism*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

#### 2. On contemporary anarchism:

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### NOTES

1. My project here is to some extent inspired by the attempt of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* to convince a political movement (social democracy) to adopt a strategy (hegemony) after having exposed some of its key concepts to a post-structuralist critique. However, while I am certainly indebted to their argument, I am engaging with a different movement, and the 'essentialisms' to be challenged are of a different kind. Thus my discussion of their work will be limited.
2. I thank three anonymous reviewers for *Anarchist Studies*, as well as Ben Day and Jamie Cross for their insightful critiques and comments - some of which I ignored at my own peril.
3. Compare Gemie's condemnation of the 'now standard Godwin-Stirner-Proudhon-Bakunin-Kropotkin approach' (Gemie 1994: 350).
4. See also Cross 2002.
5. I am here employing a distinction between 'scriptural' and 'embodied' (i.e.: practised) knowledge suggested by Jon Mitchell in a presentation on the anthropology of religion during a seminar at the University of Sussex, Brighton, 24/5/02.
6. For what can be called a 'scriptural' reading of anarchism, see e.g. Miller 1984, and Joll 1969.
7. Compare Holloway 2002: 1-10.
8. Graeber relates this notion of prefiguration directly to the anarchist wing of the globalisation movement (Graeber 2002: 62). It refers to a politics which in its current practice seeks to 'prefigure' the future society it struggles for - a notion of politics juxtaposed to a more 'systemic' approach, which would deny the possibility or efficacy of such 'utopian' communities.
9. An organisational form adopted originally by German autonomists/anarchists in confrontational demonstrations, where everyone is supposed to dress in black to avoid easy identification by the police. Since the beginning of the globalisation-critical protests, the term 'black bloc' has come to be a catch-all term in mainstream media for militant protestors, or for those who are thought to be 'anarchists' - even if any actual black bloc might include any number of political orientations.
10. While some anarcho-activists who have been around for longer may be surprised about this, the anarchist subcultures of which I speak here are comprised mostly of under-30s.
11. Anonymous1 2001, and Anonymous2 2000a are just two of many examples in writing, while the Peoples' Global Action network (PGA) can serve as one in practice.
12. See for example Gill 2000.
13. Gramsci held alliances of different social groups (classes/class fractions) under the leadership of one to be a key condition of hegemony (Gramsci 1971: 53).
14. Whether any struggle is *concretely* more important than others is a question that has to be answered after a concrete analysis, as opposed to posited in advance.
15. Related analyses of anarchism as consisting fundamentally of two strands, one more

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- monistic and one more pluralistic, can be found in Gemie 1994 and May 1994.
16. And there is indeed some disagreement as to whether the term 'revolution' should still be used by anarchists: compare Anonymous1 2001: 546.
  17. See Newman 2001, May 1994, Koch 1993, Schuermann 1986, Easterbrook 1997 and Muemken 1998. Habermas, too, recognised the anarchist potential of post-structuralist analysis (Habermas 1987: 4-5).
  18. Many other post-structuralist thinkers could be, and have been, cited to make similar points, for example Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, or Derrida (see esp. May 1994 and Newman 2001).
  19. Beyond my personal experience, such examples can be found especially in Habermas 1987 (for an overview of Habermas' and his associates' criticisms of post-structuralist thought, see Best and Kellner 1991: 240-255), and, from an anarchist point of view, in Zerzan undated.
  20. Emphasis in the original. See also Newman 2001: 30.
  21. Foucault argues that the existence of a desire, in this case for the liberation of women, already presupposes a power relation, since the latter produces 'both the desire and the lack on which it is predicated' (Foucault 1990: 81).
  22. For a critique see e.g. Bewes 1997, and for a positive appropriation the work of Slavoj Zizek, particularly Zizek 1989.
  23. Compare Joll 1969: 17-39.
  24. All translations from non-English sources by TM.
  25. Compare Newman's claim that most post-structuralist analysis 'essentialises' difference (Newman 2001: 119-124).
  26. For an introduction to these see Graeber 2002
  27. This critique mirrors closely the classical critique of 'structurelessness' that emerged from the feminist movement, which reintroduced 'anarchist' organisational models into Western activism (Freeman 1984).
  28. Compare also Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 188.
  29. As Foucault admits (Foucault 1990: 96-99).
  30. See also May: the question becomes 'which relations of power are acceptable and which are unacceptable' (1994: 123).
  31. Easterbrook cites in support of this thesis a wide range of post-structuralist authors, from Judith Butler to Deleuze and Guattari.
  32. This, unfortunately, is one of the key failures of Laclau and Mouffe's otherwise eye-opening discussion of the need for a radical-democratic hegemonic project on the left (e.g. 2001: 183).
  33. Compare Laclau and Mouffe, whose 'radical democratic' project similarly aims at a plurality of political spaces and struggles, set against 'populist' projects, which seek to narrow difference down to two opposing forces (2001: 137).
  34. The network's history and basic structure can be gleaned from their website (PGA undated)
  35. See fn. 30.
  36. General information about the consulta process on the website (European Social Consulta undated).
  37. See *ibid.* the link 'Internal Consulta Guide'.

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38. There are of course other projects on the left, which I have not discussed here - the 'list' suggested is therefore not conclusive, and not everyone who is a leftist is therefore an authoritarian or a social democrat (I thank Julian Mueller for pointing this out to me).