

A difficult subject

An anarchist without the habit of deconstruction

October 2011

A difficult subject, yes. A subject that can rapidly turn towards a polemic, sterile or otherwise. But that is not the goal. Neither is this an existential questioning, a “Who are we”, or a “Who am I”. I want to discuss about the anarchist movement the way I know it, that means the movement of today, although I can imagine that these mechanisms apply to other times or perhaps outside the anarchist movement. There are a lot of things to say, but I would like particularly to talk about the dynamics that uphold the relationships inside this movement, between each other, across language and geographical barriers. However I would not like these words to be taken for something they are not, in fact in whatever I talk about I include myself, and the mechanisms that I describe here, I have produced and reproduced myself. The will to write these lines comes from numerous discussions with anarchists from here and elsewhere, in different contexts, who also feel the need to bring up these questions amongst ourselves, to discuss them openly and without much formality. Of course I don't pretend to represent these comrades, because I start in the first place from myself.

This text is frustrating, it troubles me. I hope nonetheless that by discussing these taboos, they don't become a taboo itself, or a tool for self-castigation. I also hope, that on the occasion of these encounters around the subversive book, this contribution will be the moment to think about these questions, that are according to me, indispensable for the development of our ideas and for the encounter with other uncontrollables.

First of all, we don't have to deceive ourselves, the anarchist movement is truly a movement, maybe a bit crippled, but whatever. We can, most of us, put in the centre the question of the individuality and of the uniqueness of each individual, that will never prevent the entity bigger than the individual, the movement, from substituting itself for the individual will and for the desires that belong to everyone inside the movement. Actually, every social group has its margins, it's the condition sine qua non of its development, of its own self limitations. Since to be able to define ourselves, we also have to say what we are not and what we resemble. From there, the expression of originality in individuals and affinity groups is often normalised to fit into a mould, a sort of common binding. Until this normalisation no longer works, as in every social group, it is followed by contempt or ostracism.

That's how automations fall into place and are no longer questioned. “It's like that”, “it's not the right moment”, “it has always been like that”. These mechanisms give the power to a handful of guardians the passing on of this sacred formula, holders of the ultimate truth and are generally not so enthusiastic to put any of this into question, despite the evaluation that hindsight allows us,

which attest to decades of undisputed failures. I clearly said power and I add forced centralisation. The organization through affinity, which I agree with, has the fault of sometimes being badly distributed, to give too much power to certain individuals that have more social relations, and sometimes more seniority. We have to go through them, him or her, in order to organise, to meet other anarchists, basically for everything.

We know that power at the same time gives anxiety and is seductive, it attracts and disgusts at once. I don't talk about institutional power but about relations of power between individuals. When one starts to acquire a bit of power, one wants always more. The formula is simple and basic, it occurs among anarchist, even though we are sceptic of these topics, simply through playing with qualities such as admiration and "charisma". We start to admire the activity of anarchists in this or that country for quantitative or exotic reasons, and so we are locking ourselves up in the pursuit of models: "doing as in Greece" etc. We start to admire the prose and the charisma of this or that comrade (those who are reading this text can certainly think of a comrade that has more social value inside the movement than the others). This is where power relations are born, creating classes inside the movement, through rhetoric, through charm, or through politics. Actually, the movement becomes a place favourite to persons who know exactly what they want but who hide behind rhetorical artifices, some questions and some discussions lead to imagine the possibility of an opening that in reality is not there, because in reality "it's like that, and that's all".

Actually, these mechanisms create leaders, who end up locally centralising the activities of the movement. Those who turn away from this centralization have to in one way or another justify their absence and give plausible arguments for one's disagreement or non-presence at this or that cornerstone event of the movement, this goes for ideas as well as places (an assembly, a space, a specific struggle). The voluntary non-participation of these holy collective moments has to be justified, and not the opposite, at the risk of coming off as "arrogant". Thus, without the need of a recognized authority, the multiplicity of the ideas of the individuals is limited to the dimensions of mostly the "charismatic" comrade(s). These mechanisms are inseparable from banishment; against those who are not there where one has to be, in this struggle, in that place, in this assembly, who are thus of course "wankers", "who don't give a shit", "petit-bourgeois" etc. this seems to develop a sort of point system, not so far from parole conditions. Mechanisms that can be found in recent struggles a bit everywhere, from Val Susa to the struggle of Tunisian clandestines in Paris or the struggle against foreign detention centres throughout Europe, or even "international solidarity" when it becomes blackmail.

I've seen many comrades give up, or simply drop out because of these mechanisms. This certainly demonstrates a lack of persistence and of will to create the circumstances one wants in their life, and sometimes I hold it against them. But I cannot completely hold it against them the fact that they give up because often the strength and the persistence are on the side of those who hold the power, since in any way that is what one needs to have and keep it.

To tell the truth, I think that I'm not getting much further by discussing about something that we all clearly see inside the movement: the roles, those damn roles. At some point we have all found ourselves confined in roles within our groups. The handyman, the writer, the social butterfly, the technician, the theorist, the idiot, the intelligent one, the one that does layouts, the one that puts up the posters, the graffer, the kamikaze, the paranoid, the shy one, the distracted, the radical, the moderator, the artist, all with a level more or less echoing professionalism. What is really important, is to get out of it.

Nonetheless, I don't want to deny or level out the differences of everyone, every individual is animated by different tendencies, passions and tastes, but one thing is sure, we don't have to leave the monopoly of all the respected attributes to one or some individuals inside a group, because it's the easiest way to create a leader, sometimes even without their consent. And we know, it's been said over and over a thousand times, there are only masters because there are slaves who obey them.

So we have to distrust within our groups, as well as in the relations between groups, everything that encourages "prestige" or "merit". The elders are not the most respectable, prison doesn't make comrades more interesting, the quality of a comrade is not measurable by the number of broken windows... It just isn't quantifiable in any way. Prestige is hierarchy, and hierarchy is power. We shouldn't be afraid to expose our fears and doubts, we don't have to be intimidated by dogmas. It is not because a comrade is better in exposing his certainties rather someone else talks more about his doubts that the former has the truth on his side. First of all because truth doesn't exist, but also because rhetoric only shows the capacity to persuade and not to convince.

Those who are more used to expose their positions, and here I include myself, have thus a responsibility if they don't want to take power. Inside the anarchist movement, the mechanisms of intellectual authority have to be fought as much by those who are able to produce it as by those who are able to reproduce it.

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