

Antipode

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Intervention Symposium

Did We Accomplish the Revolution in Geographic Thought?

Anarchist Praxis and the Evolution of Social Change:

The Problem With Revolution and Thought

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The Problem With Revolution

Over 40 years ago Harvey (1972) asked, “How and why would we bring about a revolution in geographic thought?” His project was to initiate a Marxist turn for geography. Since then Harvey has gone on to become the most well known living geographer. While Harvey inspired the development of my own thinking, I could never reconcile a Marxist position with the lessons of the past, particularly in light of the research I was doing in Cambodia and its history of genocide at the hands of the Khmer Rouge (Springer 2010, 2015). While I appreciated Marxism’s critique of capitalism, ideologically it seemed far too assuming and confident for me to fully embrace it. Marxism offers a metanarrative of history that implies an established beginning (revolution) and a predetermined end (full communism), a condition that ironically sequesters temporality and the possibilities that exist within any process of social change.

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Massey (2005) taught me that space was an open process; a becoming that was always unfolding and never fixed. The restrained temporality of Marxism in this sense seemed strangely ageographical. These influences led me to ask critical questions about the place of Marxism in contemporary geographic thought and the orthodoxy that it had become within radical geography (Springer 2012, 2014b). Harvey (forthcoming) was unimpressed with my injection of anarchism, and I responded *in kind* by attempting to *be kind* by giving credit where credit is due, but without bending to Harvey's distortions (Springer forthcoming). Yet within this exchange, the question of revolution remains.

Revolution cannot be claimed as the sole domain of Marxists. Some anarchists, including geographers like Kropotkin (Baldwin 1970), have also used the term. My own reading of revolution is one of cynicism. The problem with revolution is quite simply that it implies too many things. It is a suggestion that everything needs to be changed, thereby ignoring the prefigurative activities that we are already engaging. It infers a politics of waiting for a swell whereby we may overwhelm the beast of oppression, rather than actively working to sever its tentacles of domination wherever they extend into our daily lives. It is also indicative of an implicit vanguardism, whereby "great men" will tell us when it is time, and then lead us into battle. But we don't need to be led. Instead of waiting for revolution I believe in the power of the everyday, where our collective undoing of capitalism is an ongoing process of subversion. Such an evolutionary politics of insurrection, a protean "spirit of revolt", is located as a politics of immanence entwined within our very being in the world. It is an ontology of rebellion, rather than an epistemology of deferral. Everyday conversations and mundane practices can embody this ethos of insurrection through the principles of continual reflexivity and revision. Since geography is ultimately a politics of process it bespeaks *evolution* rather than *revolution*, and so we need to consider what it might mean to drop the "r". Although the ordinary story that such a philosophy of transformation implies is less alluring than the

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grandiose idea of revolution, it has greater potential to bring results, as it is more in tune with how social change actually happens. Unlike revolution, an insurrectionary politics recognizes each moment of every single day as a site wherein the contestation of command and control can occur. It is not an end-state politics that assumes the gradations of difference can be resolved in one fell swoop.

There is a certain arrogance to Marxian notions of revolution that anarchists should refuse precisely because the line between hubris and authority is thin. Amid the revolutionary swell emerges the figure of the “great man”, where the efforts of the many become forgotten. Hence both vanguardism and the lionization of Karl Marx are central to Marxian analyses. Yet critiques of capitalism were first assembled as the proceedings of a commons who shared socialist values and communicated their ideas as a community of radical equals. The very impetus and namesake of Marxist theory appears to undermine the type of politics it hopes to advance, representing an enclosure of socialist ideas under the moniker of but one single contributor to anti-capitalist ideas. The implication for radical geography over the past four decades is that there has been far too much emphasis on Marx. Like any orthodoxy, Marxism deserves to be challenged and subverted. Harvey (forthcoming) laments that I am somehow ruining the potential for Left unity, but we should be cautious of the appeal to conformity that this type of argument implies. It is a centrist, post-political maneuver that attempts to reinscribe the authority of Marxism at the expense of plurality and the infinite other possible politics that we could imagine on the Left. My arguments have infuriated some Marxists, where Mann (2014) openly admits his “outraged defensiveness”. But why should they be so angered? I am talking only about ideas and not individuals, even if Harvey (forthcoming) wants to disingenuously accuse me of making “*ad hominem* criticisms” for the mere fact that I suggested Marx’s ideas were never his alone. The problem of course is not one for the anarchist to “listen” to. I have no interest in assuaging the anxieties of Marxists.

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Instead, it speaks to the very conflation that Marxism/Marx takes on in its political project. The man and the idea have become seemingly inseparable, and this appeal to identity politics is at the heart of the Marxist ego.

A good example of this identity-centered politics came during the 2016 AAG meeting when I presented my paper “Fuck Neoliberalism” (Springer 2016a). Although not explicitly using the term anarchism in the talk, I nonetheless deployed an anarchist critique, which evidently raised the hackles of some in attendance, seemingly because I didn’t pay proper tribute to Marx. The session ended with a question from the audience insisting that my ideas of mutual aid and reciprocity belong to Marx. They do not. Marx is not the eternal spring of all things communal. He was but one single contributor who happened to put pen to paper amid the historical unfolding of a socialist milieu that, as a practice, actually reaches back into the depths of time immemorial. Around the same time as Marx we had anarchists like Proudhon, Bakunin, de Cleyre, Kropotkin, Reclus, Parsons, Warren, Malatesta, and Goldman all advancing socialist ideas as part of a common imperative that took collective organization as a path to empowerment. Marx was undoubtedly eloquent and proficient, but he was only human, no more or less important than all the rest of us. Thus the free association of the commons is not a bolt from the blue idea bestowed through the ostensible singular genius of one Karl Marx, as though reciprocity itself is a divine inheritance. Rather, these foundations of socialist values have been worked out through the ongoing practice of innumerable people, representing the long-held and developing socialist praxis of the human family as a whole. In short, the commons is the stuff of *evolution* and *practice*, not *revolution* and *thought*.

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The problem with focusing exclusively on thought, as was Harvey's (1972) priority, is that it is an *a priori* approach. What about practice? What about methods? What about pedagogy? Are these not equally important components of geography? Isn't epistemic defiance of Marxist orthodoxy also a potential conduit to ontological disobedience that can be enabling for a praxis beyond hierarchy (Araujo 2016b)? The merger of theory with practice is crucial, but as Pol Pot, Stalin, and Mao demonstrated with brutal clarity, praxis is something of an Achilles heel insofar as Marxism is concerned. Marxists are great at thought, and Marxian theory is highly developed within geography. Its contemporary prominence among the academic Left is a testament to this capacity for advanced philosophy. Yet the measure of our success shouldn't be how well we decorate the walls of the Ivory Tower, but rather how polychromatic these ideas become once the pallet is taken up in the wider world. Unfortunately those who have employed Marxism in practice have painted their canvases primarily in the colour of blood red. Beyond this violence, a historical materialism that most Marxists too readily dismiss, we could ask what it means to subvert "theory" (Souza et al. 2016a)? What about reconfiguring theory to inextricably include the process of life as it is lived, whereby hierarchy might be challenged at every turn and not simply on the page (Springer 2014a)? For academic geographers this could mean opening ourselves up to the idea of "learning through the soles of our feet" by employing unschooling principles (Springer 2016b), erasing the binary between teacher and student by embracing co-learning, challenging the reverence assigned to the words of professors in comparison to students, building solidarity among adjuncts and sessional instructors, insisting on a commitment to friendliness in peer review as opposed to rabidity (Dear 2001), and opening conference and journal spaces to students in recognizing that knowledge production is always collective.

Theory should never take history as predetermined, as was Marx's assumption by positioning revolution as inevitable once the stages of capitalism fall away. Rather

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history should be understood as the arbiter of theory, so that any denial of its mutability has the unintended effect of producing something very different and much nastier than perhaps was intended. There is good reason for cautioning against thought, yet any insistence on an anarchist empiricism isolated from theory is a poor substitute for Marxist historical materialism. For Castoriadis (1998: 49), “theory in itself is a doing, the always uncertain attempt to realize the project of clarifying the world”. So in rethinking theory we must align it with practice and come to see the empirical and the theoretical as integral. Condemnation of theory usually presents itself as anti-intellectualism, but Kropotkin (1885) viewed geography as a means of dissipating prejudices, not of stoking the furnace of ignorance. And so the idea that anarchists have contributed nothing useful to geographic theory is nonsense. From Proudhon’s ideas of federation and surplus value (McKay 2011), to Reclus’ anticipation of contemporary political ecology (Clark and Martin 2013), to Goldman’s insistence on gender domination being linked to capitalism and the state (Shulman 2012), to Kropotkin’s notion of “mutual aid” (McKay 2014), anarchists have had a lot to contribute. Despite these insights and the “new burst of colour” that anarchist geographies have witnessed (Clough and Blumberg 2012; Springer et al. 2012), the myth that anarchism isn’t theoretically viable is unfairly perpetuated by some Marxist geographers (Harvey forthcoming; Mann 2012).

While anarchism’s influence on geography over the past 40 years has been somewhat indirect, expressed as grassroots activism and alternative politics (Castree et al. 2013), there has been a recent sea change wherein anarchist geographies are returning to theoretical prominence. The coming anarchy is marked not only by publications (Ferretti et al. forthcoming; MacLaughlin 2016; Pelletier 2013; Souza et al. 2016b; Springer 2016c; Springer et al. 2016; White et al. 2016), but also by the profusion of anarchist sessions at major conferences. The culmination of this collective effort is the first International Conference of Anarchist Geographies and Geographers (ICAGG),

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scheduled for September 2017 in Reggio Emilia, Italy (<https://icagg.org/wp/>). Within the nascent literature, anarchists have advanced theories of how we interpret the state (Araujo 2016a; Ince and Berra 2016), history (Ferretti 2016), economics (White and Williams 2014), social movements (Véron 2016), property (Springer 2013), indigenous politics (Barker and Pickerill 2012; Sloan Morgan 2016), cartography (Firth 2014), political economy (Wigger 2014), participatory development (Wald 2015), queer space-making (Rouhani 2012), religion (Megoran 2014), technologies of dissent (Curran and Gibson 2013), organization (Reedy 2014), children's geographies (Rollo 2016), civil rights (Heynen and Rhodes 2012), animal liberation (White 2015), the university (Gahman 2016), and the geographical canon itself (Norcup 2015), but always with a view towards knitting these concerns to practice. So let us not aim for a revolution in geographic thought, as was Harvey's project, but for a reinvigorated reflection on our *praxis* and an insistence on the possibilities that come from committing ourselves to social change. Such praxis should be informed by unleashing our creativity beyond thought and into the affective domains of sentience and being. This promise to praxis is thus also a promise to ourselves and to the planet we call home as an ontology of struggle. It represents a devotion to the wonder, joy, and magnificence that comes from bearing witness to each other's lives and sharing in the conviviality of our togetherness. Ultimately, this vow of solidarity is an ongoing insurrectionary process, an attitude, a spirit of revolt, and an aesthetic. It is one of geography *evolving*, of geography *becoming beautiful*.

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