

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Jacob Blumenfeld, Chiara Bottici and Simon Critchley (eds), *The Anarchist Turn*, London: Pluto Press, 2013. ISBN 9780745333427 (paper)

The aim of this volume, as the title suggests, is to intervene in what the editors call ‘the anarchist turn’; in other words, the shift towards anarchist-inspired understandings of the world, particularly within the field of political philosophy, and in those spaces and moments where theory and praxis meet. There’s been a modest but noticeable growth of interest in anarchism among geographers (see, for example, Clough and Blumberg 2012; Springer *et al.* 2012), and similar developments can be seen throughout the humanities and social sciences (in disciplines such as international relations, for example - see Prichard, 2010). Scholars are exploring anarchist perspectives as a powerful framework for research, particularly embracing anti-authoritarian modes of knowledge production (Ferrell 2009; Meyerhoff and Boehnke 2011) and an emphasis on prefigurative praxis and everyday utopianism (Gordon 2007). Much of the interest in the social sciences has taken place on the shirt-tails of the arguably over-researched ‘anti-globalisation’ movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and *The Anarchist Turn* comes as a breath of fresh air by refusing to worship at the altar of Genoa and Seattle.

All this said, we must situate the book in its geographical and historical moment. Derived from talks at the New School for Social Research in New York, the editors position themselves in the struggles of occupation that spread across the US and beyond following the 2011 occupation of New York’s Zuccotti Park. In fact, delivered shortly before Occupy Wall Street, the talks on which the chapters are based, “found unanticipated and glorious expression” (Critchley, p. 1) in the wave of occupations that emerged soon after they were presented. And with Arab Spring occupations such as the camp at Egypt’s Tahir Square, and now the occupation and protest movement that has rocked the Turkish state, the notion and practice of occupation has gained further momentum. Not only is this taking place among a hardcore of ‘usual suspects’, argues editor Jacob Blumenfeld in his postface, but it’s also a statement and tactic of broader populations flung aside by capital and the state in the settling debris of the aftermath of

financial crisis. As elites have opportunistically implemented grinding austerity measures, so people have begun to find voice and hope in the apocalypse, in opposition to capitalist and state actors.

The Anarchist Turn is a brave volume that should perhaps not be read as a unitary, singular work, but as a series of interventions in the membrane where academia and activism touch. We find deeply theoretical essays lodged somewhat awkwardly alongside empirical papers and autobiographical reflections. The book offers a series of pithy commentaries wrestling with the ways in which “new social conditions” have come into being, while noting with frustration that “the revolutionary horizons that people aspire towards...have remained frozen” (Blumenfeld, p. 240). Revolutionaries, the editors argue, lag behind the organic compositions of struggle that have erupted across the globe, and their book is partly an effort, in some way, to catch up.

In the opening chapter, Chiara Bottici’s exploratory dovetailing of Marxist political economy and anarchist ethics is at once a convincing theoretical tract and a powerful anti-sectarian statement. Following this theme of sharing on a different plane, Banu Bargu considers the act of eating - of the collective sharing of food - as an everyday sociality that “[allows] ourselves the experience of the common” (p. 52), and, similarly, Todd May offers a Derridean treatment of the radical political potential of friendship. This first section of the book, ‘Subverting Boundaries’, ends with Miguel Abensour situating anarchy in Levinas’ philosophy as a “metapolitical” notion.

A section on anarchism and feminism follows. Echoing work by the likes of Jamie Heckert (2010), Mitchell Cowen Verter considers anarchism as a quotidian “ethic of care”, inspired by anarcha-feminist treatments of care that transcend boundaries of masculinity and femininity and suggest effective strategies for nurturing cultures of mutual aid in everyday life. This is followed by a chapter in which Cinzia Arruzza traces the development of anarcha-feminism, using the early work of Emma Goldman to push contemporary anarcha-feminists beyond the errors of ‘second wave’ 1970s feminism. Laura Corradi’s chapter analysing the interplay between different radical Left perspectives in activists’ self-perceptions ends this section by seeking to undermine and destabilise factionalism within the radical Left.

The third part of the book is entitled ‘Geographies of Anarchy’. Co-production of virtual space in an open source model of Constant’s *New Babylon* is the subject of Stephen Duncombe’s

interesting chapter, concerning the “latent, open quality” (p. 155) of anarchist and utopian spatial imaginations. Alberto Toscano approaches the spatialities of anarchism with a provocative essay on the terrains of struggle that open and close according to spatio-temporal situations. Toscano traces the changing spatial logics of Western capital and states from the production of commodities to the flows of communication and connection, arguing that contemporary insurrectionary strategies ought to target the latter. The third and final geographical essay, by Stephanie Wakefield, is a labyrinthine theoretical exploration of Reiner Schürmann’s “faultline topology” as an alternative imaginary to scalar thinking. As a geographer, this section was the most tantalising of the book: the papers are so diverse in style and subject that it is hard to triangulate between them, and by opening up important spatial questions, they leave the geographer-reader eagerly wanting more.

Andrej Grubačić’s insightful semi-autobiographical sketch of anarchism’s internationalist genesis, and its influence in Socialist Yugoslavia, segues well from geography to the following section on ‘The Anarchist Moment’. What differentiated anarchism from other socialisms pre-1917, as a movement and a philosophy, was - and perhaps still is - that it sought inspiration from beyond the European Enlightenment tradition as well as from within it; anarchism at its best is a global philosophy of praxis that functions and is produced through diverse ‘organic’ channels that do not (solely) originate from a handful of big, bearded, white men. For this reason, the book would have been even richer if it incorporated more work that engages with anarchist politics and philosophies of, or from, ‘the South’. Judith Butler’s critically supportive treatment of anarchist initiatives in Israel-Palestine is an excellent follow-on to this question of non-Western approaches to anarchism, interrogating how (or if) one might find forms of community and citizenship that are not positioned in relation to statehood. A final chapter is offered by The Accused of Tarnac, the nine authors of *The Coming Insurrection* (see *The Invisible Committee* 2009) who became famous for their arrest around a series of sabotage attacks in France in 2008. Their polemical yet thoughtful chapter seeks to marry sabotage as a tactic of struggle with the notion of the commune as a living space of connection and prefigurative relationships. As a final substantive chapter, this is a poetic piece, rooted in a grounded politics that, although many may disagree with their promotion of sabotage, raises a host of tactical and analytical issues that few dare to excavate.

During his essay, Grubačić picks up on an issue that niggled at me throughout the book. He notes that “[i]f our politics is to be effective, our language needs to be simple and understandable, as well as beautiful” (p. 194). With such a diversity of topics and writers, the reader of this book is wrenched from one writing style to the next - from deep, near-impenetrable theory, through poetic prose, to ‘thick’ empirical analytics. There is, of course, an important place for theory, but if we are to cross-fertilise between the Ivory Tower and grounded praxis - as the editors clearly value in their call to “put theory and praxis into some sort of communication” (p. 2) - then we must be mindful of our lexicon.

At the end of the book, I found myself wondering if there really is an anarchist *turn* taking place. A turn suggests a shift in discourse and practice that signifies a transformative moment in the way we exist in, and perceive, the world. There certainly has been an upsurge of interest in the academic world, as the editors rightly acknowledge in the title of their book, but outside, on the streets, it appears at first glance to be business as usual - we fight, we create, we split and converge, we fail and succeed in varying ways and to varying extents. Yet, looking at the shifting terrains we now face, perhaps a new phase of struggle may be rearing its head - new (or renewed and reworked) conditions, tactics, subjects, and loci of power. Perhaps not anarchist, but the proliferation of movements for social justice that are erupting against the twin forces of capital and state suggests that a new phase of struggle could indeed be emerging in many areas of the globe.

The Anarchist Turn communicates its points with an impressive power, passion and precision, interweaving the harsh materiality of struggle with the analytic rigour of academia. Despite some small frustrations, many of the chapters contain pressing critical insights and glimmers of hope that all radical Left perspectives can and should engage with. They wrestle with some of the most fundamental questions of thought and praxis, challenging the reader to unthink established leftist doctrine and assumed realities, and explore new terrains and modes of struggle. This is a book to provoke, to be dis/agreed with, and argued over late into the night: read it as such.

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