The shape of geography to come

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Abstract

In this commentary, I offer a constructive critique of certain elements of Springer's (2014) paper, from an anarchist-geographic perspective. I welcome his paper in bringing to light some of the more politically problematic elements of (orthodox) Marxist thought, and raising important points about the practicalities of social change, but he does so in a rather binaristic manner. Accordingly, I address several elements of Springer's characterisation of both anarchism and Marxism – especially on political organisation and praxis – in order to nuance some of his arguments and draw out broader lessons for radical geographical scholarship and the future of the radical/revolutionary left in general.

Keywords: anarchism, Marxism, political strategy, prefiguration, organisation

"All dressed up with nowhere to go – I told you so."

- Refused, *The Shape of Punk to Come* (1998)

Refused[ii], an anarchist-influenced punk band from Umeå, Sweden, concluded their musical career in 1998 with an album that was partly a damning critique of the increasingly vacuous and commercialised punk genre. By proverbially 'going down in flames', they inadvertently rendered themselves eternal idols of the musical scene they left for (nearly) dead. This provocation came to represent not a death knoll, nor a denouncement, but a *call for renewal*. It is in this spirit that I welcome Springer's (2014) polemic on the state of radical geography today, and his offering of an anarchist alternative.

Springer's (2014) paper represents an opening up of a long-overdue debate within radical geographical scholarship concerning "the concrete materiality of how revolution is actually operationalised" (p. 19). All too often, radical geographers have undertaken profoundly incisive critical analysis of capitalism, patriarchy, racism and so on, but often with little or no reference to the dirty, practical mechanics of how to go about making material changes in the world[iii], and often uncomfortably thin when it comes to suggesting what to create, and how to go about creating it. This is likely a factor of academic knowledge production in general, since radicals and revolutionaries outside the Ivory Tower have probably spent most of their intellectual energies on these debates (e.g. Dielo Truda, 2014 [1926]; Lenin, 1987 [1902]: ch. 2). Perhaps, as Swyngedouw (2010) notes, a key barrier may also be a *fear of failure*, in light of 20th Century communist experiments. Thus, in bluntly laying these

debates bare, Springer forces us – anarchist and Marxist alike – to engage with them head-on.

There are elements of Springer's (2014) argument, however, that require some nuancing – both in his characterisation of Marxism in geography and his particular brand of anarchism. Springer is perhaps attempting to cover too much in too little space, leading to some simplifications that sometimes obscure the much more fundamental point he is trying to convey. I do not wish to dwell on these issues, but from an anarchist perspective, for example, discussions of violence are far more complex than a simple division between a violent and out-of-touch minority perpetrating 'propaganda of the deed' and the morally respectable non-violent majority (Wellbrook, 2009). Anarchist debates on violence have raged for over a century, and alongside Springer's persuasive argument, there are also convincing arguments indicating how an unyielding focus on non-violence can in fact serve to strengthen the oppressive structures and relations we seek to dismantle (Gelderloos, 2007). Indeed, from my own decade or more of activism and research among anarchists in the UK, the (myriad) anarchist views on violence tend to orbit more of a pragmatic choice (how can we achieve X? What tactics will have what effects, and to what ends?) than a moral dilemma (is violence (in)consistent with our normative frameworks?). Thus, in the Spanish Civil War, for example, the millions who sided with the anarchists were involved simultaneously in violent warfare *and* peacefully prefigurative self-management (Peirats, 1990).

There are also some misunderstandings of Marxism within Springer's text, most of which I will let the Marxists deal with. One issue concerns the assertion that the autonomist tradition is essentially anarchism in Marx's clothing, which disregards an entire (admittedly broadly anti-authoritarian, anti-vanguardist) body of thought and action from *Potere Operaia*[iv] to the present day that self-consciously traces its roots explicitly and directly to Marx. As Cleaver (1979: 11) notes quite clearly, autonomist Marxism "self-consciously and unilaterally structures its approach to determine the meaning and relevance of every concept [of Marxism] to the immediate development of working-class struggle" (cf. Panzieri, 1976). Thus, even 'post-autonomist' thinkers such as Hardt and Negri (2000) or Holloway (2002), who influence anarchists and Marxists alike, derive their thought and praxis chiefly from Marxism.

The question, then, may be less about 'ownership' of ideas and more about amassing the structures, attitudes, strategies and tactics that are conducive to building a world free of exploitation and domination, and this is what I want to discuss here. After all, while (orthodox) Marxist strategies have almost consistently led to brutal totalitarianism, they, like the anarchists, want to create a peaceful, free and equal world. Springer's powerful (and correct) assertion that Proudhon's pioneering anarchist work directly and heavily influenced Marx is an important and often-ignored fact of Marxism's intellectual genesis. However, framing this fact as an indication of the innovative contributions an anarchist imagination can make is perhaps more important than 'reclaiming' concepts from the Marxists. Therefore, it is productive to consider a broader picture of the radical, and explore anarchism's existing and potential contributions to social transformation.

The figure of Max Stirner looms large in this paper, foregrounding the individual as a fundamental building block of an anarchist philosophy. Yet, Stirner's influence on anarchism is rather ambiguous, also adopted by individualist anarchists (Brooks, 1994) whose politics are quite far removed from the communist anarchisms that Springer draws from elsewhere in his paper. The implications of Stirner's 'egoist anarchism' are contested by anarchists of the communist variety (see McKay, 2008: 1561-73), as his emphasis on the innate egoism of the individual seemingly creates a tension between the free will of said individual and their voluntary commitment to collective wellbeing. However, if we consider Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*, he argues that while the tendency towards mutual aid lies at a far more primal level than the egoism of capitalist relations, it is not a selfless or loving act towards the other; rather, it is "the unconscious recognition… of the close dependency of every one's happiness upon the happiness of all" (Kropotkin, 2006 [1902]: xvi). The moral geography of anarchism is thus rather more complex than a cursory glance at Stirner might initially suggest, with the overlapping scales and practices of self- and collective interest producing a meshwork of contingent moral and practical decision-making structures within the self[v].

The egoist tendencies of some anarchists have, however, led to some of anarchism's more problematic elements, just as orthodox Marxism's total subsumption of the individual into the collective has led to its own, often brutal, vices. Anarchism's prefigurative politics emphasises the ongoing development of the practices and relations of envisioned future worlds in the present – but on what scale, and in what contexts? A strictly Stirnerite reading of anarchism might lead – and has led – some anarchists into a self-centred ghetto of

individual lifestyle choices such as dumpster-diving and squatting as their *modus operandi*. One such contemporary US 'lifestylist' anarchist collective, CrimethInc, once notoriously declared "poverty, unemployment, homelessness – if you're not having fun, you're not doing it right!" (quoted in W. 2006: np.). Rightly, the shameless middle-class privilege with which they made this statement was immediately denounced by the majority of the Anglophone anarchist movement, but it illustrates how a narrow focus on individual lifestyle choices can lead to problematic political effects. Certain lifestyle choices, and experimental forms of living such as intentional communities, can be and have been part of a broader anarchist strategy – as 'incubators' of alternative social and economic relationships – but as a core strategy for changing the world, they can be deeply exclusionary and ineffective (Crane, 2012; Ince, 2010).

Building inclusive and effective spaces of organising is a challenge for both anarchists and Marxists alike. Both are located on the far fringes of contemporary political debate, where they face challenges that tend not to trouble academic geographers. Springer was right both to indicate the institutionalisation of the Marxist project within geography and to condemn the perpetuation of popular misunderstandings of anarchism among some in the discipline. However, while prejudice and misrepresentation is an enduring problem within geography, the breadth of theoretical experimentation in the discipline, and openness among (many) geographers towards radical and critical ideas, is a far cry from experiences of anarchist-inspired scholars in fields such as international relations (e.g. Prichard, 2011) and law (e.g. Finchett-Maddock, 2012), who face far bigger hurdles and far stauncher orthodoxies.

This is not to suggest that radical geographers can relax, or that their ideas are eternally guaranteed a place in geography's conceptual arsenal. As we have seen in recent years, the appropriation of radical rhetoric and ideas by more centrist elements within geography has not gone unnoticed (Amin and Thrift, 2005; Smith, 2005). Plus, the growing neoliberal stranglehold is increasingly prioritising policy-oriented and for-profit research agendas, pushing radicals to the margins of the university funding landscape. In the ongoing decomposition of the full range of socialist movements in the Global North, and their failures to make substantial or long-term interventions in the various mass uprisings across the globe[vi], radical scholars might do well to consider possible synergies that could be developed – not to subsume differences into a problematic 'broad front' but to think about how our cumulative intellectual labour could contribute to mass, organised, grassroots movements.

In this regard, we might do well to briefly consider two forms of anarchist praxis that rarely receive academic attention but which indicate alternatives to the stark divisions between Marxist (organised; economistic; disciplined) and anarchist (lifestylist; spontaneous; decentralised) stereotypes. The first is syndicalism; a predominantly anarchist-driven[vii] initiative of creating revolutionary trade unions that are organised, controlled and led by workers themselves (Rocker, 2004 [1938]). These unions eschew the hierarchical, bureaucratic structures of mainstream unions, as well as both electoral and revolutionary political parties, in favour of the autonomous agency of workers themselves. In building workplace power in this way, syndicalism seeks not only to incrementally improve material working conditions but also to develop the skills and relationships to eventually do away

with the ruling class altogether. The early 20th Century saw the emergence of huge syndicalist unions – e.g. the IWW (North America), SAC (Sweden), FAU (Germany), USI (Italy), and CNT (Spain, France) – across the industrialised world, maintaining political independence from market-capitalist and so-called 'communist' state-capitalist imaginaries alike (van der Walt and Schmidt, 2009). Arguably, the (anarcho-)syndicalist movement has been the most successful anarchist tendency in terms of mass mobilisation, self-management, and winning material improvements for ordinary people across the globe.

Intense state repression and shifting terrains of struggle (e.g. Hall, 2001) led to the decline of syndicalist unions in the latter half of the 20th Century, but contemporary syndicalist currents[viii] are resurgent in many places, indicating that it has enduring relevance to contemporary conditions. Indeed, given that a growing body of literature in labour geography notes the resilience of labour agency in hostile political-economic climates (e.g. Castree, 2007; Peck, 2012), syndicalism may be more relevant than ever. The strength of syndicalism is arguably its fusion of immediate improvements in working conditions and the creation of prefigurative structures of workers' self-management, although its critics note an overbearing focus on the (formal) economic sphere and wage labour[ix]. The syndicalist programme offers an interesting case study in the productive tensions of how organised, mass prefiguration can function, operating through the spaces and structures of everyday economic production to forge anarchistic relationships in the heart of capitalism itself. These autonomous spatialities are quite distinct from the more transient spaces of, say, Occupy, operating through immanent, long-term social relationships and networks, rather than temporary, spectacular ruptures in the mundane (Ince, 2010; 2012).

Another, more controversial model of anarchist strategy derives from the failure of the anarchist armies in the Ukraine during the 1917 revolution. Commonly known as the 'Makhnovists' after their most charismatic commander, Nestor Makhno, they collectivised large areas of Ukraine along anarchist lines, before their federation of independent soviets fell at the hands of the Red Army (Arshinov, 2002 [1923]). The basic principles of platformism involve anarchist organisations with theoretical and tactical unity, stressing the need for well-organised anarchist organisation and "stand[ing] against the tactic of unaccountable individualism" in favour of "collective responsibility" (Dielo Truda, 2010 [1926]: 25). In this sense, they represent the opposite end of the anarchist spectrum to 'lifestylist' anarchisms.

Platformist groups tend to be small, disciplined, and tight-knit, operating largely as a tendency within broad-based organisations and social movements to advocate anarchist analysis and tactics. The platformist approach represents an effort to learn from the successes of Marxist tactics and apply them to grassroots anarchist logics, as opposed to assuming vanguard roles. Although critiqued by other anarchists as a quasi-authoritarian effort to 'Bolshevise' anarchism (Klien, 2010), platformist groups have nevertheless had some level of traction in broader social movements particularly in Argentina, South Africa, Italy, Brazil and Ireland[x]. The large but often-forgotten early 20th Century anarchist movements in East Asia also utilised variants of organisation very similar to platformism (van der Walt and Schmidt, 2009).

Both syndicalism and platformism emphasise organisation, (self-)discipline, and planning; qualities that many, including Springer (2014), generally associate with Marxism. Both, unsurprisingly, grew partly out of a dissatisfaction with the ineffective anarchist movements that had gone before them and a recognition that, for all their flaws, Marxists were successfully building mass movements. Springer's (2014) critiques of orthodox Marxist strategy – of party-building, rigid and hierarchical structures, and so on – are absolutely correct, but we should also think more laterally. Before the split in the First International, as Springer hints, an incredible array of ideas and strategies was being openly discussed and built upon without the stark, formalised divide that dogs us now. There were profound disagreements, but by occupying the same organisational and discursive spaces, anarchists and Marxists forged a spectrum of differing but interconnected perspectives. Alongside anarchist initiatives like syndicalism and platformism, there are many examples of Marxist tendencies that derive inspiration from anarchists. Springer mentions autonomists and Situationists, but other Marxisms such as 'council communism' eschewed corruptible unions and Parties altogether in favour of distinctly anarchistic federations of self-managed workers' councils (Pannekoek, 2002 [1952]).

Maintaining 'grey areas' offers space for theoretical and movemental innovation. The "spontaneity" that Springer (2014) identifies in anarchist praxis is not a product of some specifically anarchist 'consciousness' but of certain *organisational logics* that nurture flexibility and creativity. Organisation is, after all, simply a pattern of human relations, and anarchist patternings make space for the spontaneous and the experimental, but they

themselves do not have to be spontaneous in nature. One of the most grave flaws of the 'propaganda of the deed' anarchism that Springer (2014:26) rightly critiques is an assumption that an anarchic human spontaneity resides within the individual, waiting to be triggered and multiplied by inspiration from spectacular acts of sabotage or assassination. For the most part, what Springer identifies as spontaneity is, in fact, carefully crafted on a low-level, 'infrapolitical' level, built over a number of years and solidified through personal networks, past experiences, other solidarities, and is manifested in a range of spatial, organisational and relational forms over time (Graeber, 2009; Ince, 2010). In the ongoing social movement quest to 'scale up', anarchists have variously sought to develop forms of organisation – based around the distinctively anarchist principles of self-management, mutual aid and voluntary association – for maintaining coherent and effective organisation while also maximising opportunities for freedom, participation – even play. It was through this restructuring of organisational and social relationships that the anarcho-syndicalist CNT in Spain and the platformist Makhnovshchina in Ukraine built effective – if ultimately unsuccessful – mass movements for the propagation and prefiguration of anarchist ways of living in the shadow of war.

But what is the relevance of these debates and histories to the future of radical geography? A central thread of Springer's (2014) paper, alongside his other work (e.g. Springer, 2010), focuses on establishing anarchism as a distinctive mode of geographical analysis – certainly welcomed by myself. Another thread of his paper is a disavowal of Marxism in response to the systematic appropriation, defamement, and misrepresentation of anarchist ideas by some of its followers. It is questionable as to whether geographers have been particularly

guilty of this, and it may be more productive to consider the ways in which anarchist and Marxist geographers can learn from one another in a spirit of comradely critique inspired by the diverse and admittedly fragile unity of the First International.

For example, although Springer (2014) is absolutely correct in emphasising that there is more to anarchism than a critique of the state, it does distinguish anarchism from virtually all other political philosophies. Thus, rather than tinkering at the edges of the deeply embedded statism that runs through geographical scholarship, anarchists are equipped with a far stronger analytical framework than Marxists to interrogate the political role and effects of the state in capitalist society. This is something substantial that Marxist geographers may find analytically and conceptually useful. In return, a key factor in the prominence of Marxism in geography has been their ability to produce a more-or-less comprehensive research agenda and holistic spatial theory that explains how (major parts of) society work. The nascent anarchist field can learn from the more developed Marxist field that has been in existence for more than 40 years, but which grew from the same modest beginnings.

In this commentary, I have sought fragments of a renewed radical geography through some of the interstices between anarchism and Marxism, and hidden tendencies within anarchism itself. Within our heterodox discipline, the opportunities for anarchists to make innovative interventions in the fundamental underpinnings of geographical knowledge are already myriad, but outside the academy socialists of all persuasions are failing to capitalise upon some of the most intense crises of capitalism, climate and democracy in history. Rather than

rejecting one another wholesale, anarchists and Marxists alike would do well to reflect on Otto von Bismarck's exclamation shortly after the split of the First International:

> Crowned heads, wealth and privilege may well tremble should ever again the Black and Red unite! (cited in Kinna and Prichard, 2012: 2)

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[ii] Matt Smith introduced me to Refused. He should certainly receive some credit for the reflections in this opening section.

[iii] Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, and the varied work of scholar-activists such as Gibson-Graham (e.g. 2006), the Autonomous Geographies Collective (e.g. Chatterton, Pickerill and Hodkinson, 2010) and Wills (e.g. 2012) are some of the more prominent in this regard.

[iv] *Potere Operaio* ("Workers' Power") was an early, influential Italian autonomist organisation, active from 1968 to 1973. Originally ascribing the name *operaismo* ('workerism') to what we generally call 'autonomist Marxism', this organisation and ones like it such as *Autonomia Operaio* and *Lotta Continuia* formed the organisational and theoretical core of the autonomist tendency within Marxism (see Wright, 2002).

[v] Some varied approaches to anarchism, moral decision-making, and the self can be found in Franks and Wilson [eds.] (2010).

[vi] The obvious example, in this regard, is in the Ukraine, where the recent insurgency has arguably been dominated by hard-right, nationalist and outright neo-fascist groups.

[vii] The precise politics of syndicalism are somewhat contested. While some, such as the IWW, seek to remove the 'politics' of factionalism from the union, emphasising workers' democratic control of the economy as the primary goal rather than a particular political label, most syndicalist unions self-identify as *anarcho*-syndicalist, with an explicit purpose to move towards an anarchist world. The term 'anarcho-syndicalism', however, only appeared as late as the 1920s, initially used as a derisory label given by pro-USSR Marxists to discredit the syndicalist unions and instead draw workers towards vanguardist party politics (Berry, 2009).

[viii] By 'currents' I mean not only syndicalist unions but also syndicalist groups and tendencies within mainstream unions. Again, there is a complex internal politics concerning the relationships between these two groups of syndicalists, but this is beyond the remit of this short commentary.

ix However, syndicalist unions were often the first unions to recognise and support the struggles of women, immigrants, and prisoners (e.g. Thompson and Bekken, 2005), as well as many members participating in alternative economic practices such as co-operatives.

x An example of platformist involvement in a broad-based grassroots campaign can be seen in the case of the anti-'bin tax' movement in Ireland around 2003 (see for e.g. WSM, 2006).