

Anarcha-feminism: an alternative critique on citizenship and the State

Ever since the emergence of both anarchism and feminism in modern Western thinking, numerous scholars have drawn parallels between these two concepts. However called a dichotomy by some, many see the liaison 'anarcha-feminism' as the ultimate oxymoron. This paper will explore some of the key concepts of historical and contemporary anarcha-feminism, discussing subjects such as the concept of gendering citizenship, the patriarchy sustained by the nation state and an illustration of direct action by women in a communalist anarchist society during the Spanish civil war. It will also briefly touch on how anarchist theory can provide an alternative framework for International Relations studies.

Introducing the concept of anarchism

Perhaps due to many prejudices and stereotyping, anarchism has been largely ignored by political sciences and IR scholars in contemporary thinking. Academic literature concerning anarchist topics is scarce and there is virtually no serious tradition of anarchist philosophy in the mainstream social sciences. Also in the field of feminism, the idea of anarchism is rather marginal. This is, however, a strange ascertainment, since the widely known radical feminist movement shares many key features with communalist anarchism. Vice versa, one can argue that many self-proclaimed anarchist affinity groups are, in their own praxis, not gender-conscious. Despite this, the relevance of anarchism should not be underestimated. Writers such as bell hooks have emphasized the importance of more inclusive feminist theory. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (hooks, 2000) she stresses that many voices are being marginalized in mainstream feminist thinking, and that there is a need to explore and recognize the many different categories and aspects of oppression. She calls for a restructuring of the cultural framework of power, one that does not find oppression of others necessary. The value of anarchist theory for contemporary feminist movements and its relation to IR will be further discussed below.

The concept of anarchism might need a short introduction (when using the word 'anarchism' in this article, we refer to the concept of communalist anarchism, as used by Ackelsberg (2010), or communist anarchism, by Kornegger, as there are different 'sorts' of anarchism, such as anarcho-capitalism and individualistic, rather right-wing anarchism). In *Anarchism: The Feminist Connection* (2002), Peggy Kornegger discusses her encounters with what she calls 'communist anarchism' and the discovery that it can provide a framework for feminist thinking. She mentions two general misconceptions about anarchism, which more or less oppose each other on two sides of a continuum. The best-known stereotype must be that of the masked bomber in a black cape, most likely based on 19th century anarchists who sought to destroy the existing social order by means of terror. On the other side of the spectrum, there is the much-heard criticism of anarchism being idealistic; that it can or could be only possible as a Utopian dream, never to be brought into real life practice. In her article, Kornegger points to both the Spanish Revolution and the May '68 uprisings in France; the Spanish Revolution is used as an example to indicate that an anarchism-based society is indeed possible, and by adducing May '68, the author states that spontaneous action can rise 'from' the population, even in a high-industrial, consumption based civilization. Although May '68 exceeds the specific scope of this paper, the example of the Spanish Revolution will serve to further illustrate the role of women within the anarchist movement against the oppression of both the State and male domination. What is important nonetheless, is the acknowledgement that on a number of occasions, people have succeeded in establishing communities and even societies that could be labeled anarchist.

Emma Goldman, well-known feminist and fierce defender of anarchism (and one of the few mainstream-accepted anarcho-feminist thinkers) once defined it as “...*the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion; the liberation of the human body from the dominion of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government. Anarchism stands for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth, an order that will guarantee to every human being free access to the earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations.*” (1911) Anarchism, in other words, envisions following major principles –note that this list is not exhaustive: (1) commitment to community and freedom, (2) a society without hierarchical relations and institutionalized authority, (3) an egalitarian

society characterized by diversity and (4) a belief in spontaneous action and organization (Ackelsberg, 2010; Kornegger, 2002) (As one may notice, these principles seem somewhat similar to those of radical feminism).

1. Traditional communism emphasizes the importance of the community, and today's neo-liberal capitalism stresses the role of the individual, whereas anarchism draws a connection between both the individual and the community. Anarchists believe that "true individuality implies freedom without infringement on that of others. Specifically, in terms of social and political organization, this means balancing individual initiative with collective action through the creation of structures which enable decision-making to rest in the hands of all those in a group, community, or factory, not in the hands of 'representatives' or 'leaders'." (Kornegger, 2002) Thus: "personal freedom and social life are not mutually antagonistic, but interdependent and mutually supportive" (Ackelsberg, 2010). The balance between freedom of the individual and taking initiative in sustaining social organization is crucial, and can be used to radically redefine the traditional distinction between the private and the public sphere. The frequently heard cry that the personal is political, counts as a strong objection towards this rigid demarcation, and calls for ways to merge the private and the public, the individual and the social.

2. Anarchists seek to abolish all kinds of hierarchical relations, where one human being has power over another. Rather than to seize power or seize control over the state (as uttered by traditional communism) the goal is to make power *dissolve* (Kornegger, 2002), to organize society in such a way that the state simply 'gets lost in the shuffle'. An important nuance is the notion of 'institutionalized authority'. The rejection of institutionalized power does not automatically mean there can never be leaders and followers. In several situations, some people will have more knowledge about certain subjects than others, and may be able to exercise 'natural authority' (a term coined by Bakunin and Kropotkin) on the basis of such knowledge (Ackelsberg, 2010). However, people can always *decide freely* whether to follow or not, and, unlike institutionalized power, they will not be sanctioned for disobeying that authority. This form of leadership *is* compatible with freedom, and possibly even necessary for the smooth functioning of society. bell hooks (supra) called for a re-evaluation of oppression and the recognition of different sorts of oppression of all mankind, whether

female or male, black or white. For anarchists, hierarchical forms of oppression are complex and ubiquitous. The absence of one privileged “point of rupture” (Ackelsberg, 2010) is most typical for anarchism. There can never be a single fault line or a single front of oppression, such as the contraposition between worker and employer, women and men, and so on. The recognition that there is “no fundamental contradiction” does not imply the end of politics, as frequently stated in the past by post-modernist scholars after the implosion of the USSR, on the contrary; it is the beginning of all politics.

3. In *A Fable About Social Structure* (Blau, 1980) Blau explored the relation between differentiation between people and integration. According to his hypotheses, complex and various differences between members of a community lead to a better integration and social cohesion. Because there are as many intersections as there are different features amongst its members, the creation of so-called in-groups (against out-groups) based on one distinctive difference is not possible, as people can also identify themselves with the ‘out-group’ based on other features. He argued that “there is too much inequality but that there can never be too much heterogeneity”. Colin Ward also wrote in *Anarchism In Action* that “harmony is achieved through complexity” (Ward, 1982). Along with Ward, anarchists envision a society characterized by diversity, “one that not only tolerates, but positively supports, differences among groups of people, and also among people within such groups” (Ackelsberg, 2010). In addition, these differences can never be the basis of dominating relationships, thus supporting an egalitarian society, where every member of the group is equal to another.

4. Like the radical feminists, anarchism implies a theory of social change. Kornegger (2002) writes that “Anarchists don't deny the necessity of organization; they only claim that it must come from below, not above, from within rather than from without. No one can dictate the exact shape of the future. Spontaneous action within the context of a specific situation is necessary if we are going to create a society which responds to the changing needs of individuals and groups. Anarchists believe in fluid forms: small-scale participatory democracy in conjunction with large-scale collective cooperation and coordination (without loss of individual initiative).” There cannot be a person or group dictating the course of these events and radical change should neither be forced or directed. Spontaneous, direct action

should rise 'from' the people, who can wilfully organize in collectives. The main instrument of reaching this goal is *consciousness raising*. Here, many parallels with radical feminism can again be drawn.

'Mujeres Libres': Illustrating the importance of women

From what is written above one could argue that in essence, anarcha-feminism is the ultimate oxymoron, since anarchism should always imply equality of sexes and a struggle against the oppression of women. Though history shows us that anarchist action can emerge from the people, it also shows us an important example of how women rights and emancipation are not always inherent to anarchism in practice.

In *Free Women Of Spain* (1991), Martha Ackelsberg writes about the Mujeres Libres-movement, which literally means 'Free Women'. In 1936, the Popular Front booked a successful electoral victory. A group of generals stated a 'declaration of opposition' against this government, and carried out a coup, supported by conservative groups such as monarchists, religious conservatives and the Falange, a radical fascist movement. Causes of the Civil War are numerous and one could mention many complexities and internal struggles on different sides, but describing such historical details lies beyond the scope of this article, as mentioned before. Kornegger (2002) summarizes the proceedings as following: "...the people fought back with a fury which checked the coup within 24 hours. At this point, ballot box success became incidental; total social revolution had begun. While the industrial workers either went on strike or actually began to run the factories themselves, the agricultural workers ignored landlords and started to cultivate the land on their own. Within a short time, over 60% of the land in Spain was worked collectively - without landlords, bosses, or competitive incentive. Industrial collectivization took place mainly in the province of Catalonia, where anarco-syndicalist influence was strongest. ...So, after 75 years of preparation and struggle, collectivization was achieved, through the spontaneous collective action of individuals dedicated to libertarian principles." Marta Iniguez de Heredia (2012) goes on to explain that "Spain offers a good case study of the history and current relevance of anarcha-feminism. Spain has seen three periods of intense gender consciousness-raising both in the Spanish male-dominated anarchist movement and the broader public. In the first

period, the late nineteenth century, anarchists developed a critique of patriarchy though this critique was often relegated to the peripheries of anarchist movement. The second period, which spanned the early twentieth century, can be considered the cradle and climax of anarcha-feminist movement. This is when *Mujeres Libres* were active. Finally, the third period, the post-dictatorship period until today, reveals a pattern within anarchist movement of disregarding the importance of fighting gender oppression here and now. This pattern points to the continuing importance of anarcha-feminism.”

During the Spanish Civil War, volunteers from all over Europe joined the battle against Franco; among them many British women. In this perspective, this serves as a strong example to show how war brought together women from various political and social backgrounds, organizing themselves into committees to either raise funds for the Republicans or to go to Cataluña to help as nurses. “Women often took leading roles on these committees and were very active supporters. They formed networks across the country and worked together in the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief to coordinate their efforts. It was all very different from the normal male hierarchical structure in political parties, in which women usually played a very minor role.” (Jackson, 2006) “...the response amongst British women to help the cause of the Republican government was remarkable in its strength. The spontaneous mobilisation of large numbers of women in Britain to help the people of the Spanish Republic was an extraordinary phenomenon.” One can argue that this can be seen as a striking instance in which women organized into a transnational movement, concerned about the faith of fellow women in a struggle for emancipation. The Spanish right was for many the embodiment of the subordination of women, who’s place was at home as keeper of the household, banished from public forums and not desired to take part in the ‘public sphere’.

The ‘*Mujeres Libres*’ never called themselves feminists, though. They identified feminism with a bourgeois ideology. They argued “We are not, and were not then feminists. We were not fighting against men. We did not want to substitute a feminist hierarchy for a masculine one. It's necessary to work, to struggle, together because if we don't we'll never have a social revolution. But we needed our own organisation to struggle for ourselves”. (Ackelsberg, 1991) The movement was founded by Lucia Sanchez Saornil, writer and poet,

and Mercedes Composada, who was a lawyer from a leftist household. After meeting the Grupo Cultural Feminino in 1936 both groups united to form the Agrupacion Mujeres Libres, creating a National federation. Saornil and Composada had tried to be active in groups like CNT but were frustrated with the way women were treated by the militants. Ackelsberg describes several examples of how female activists in organisations such as the CNT and the FAI, both movements being anarchist in theory, were in minority, and moreover, were either neglected or ridiculed. The general sentiment was that: *“All those companeros, however radical they may be in cafes, unions, and even affinity groups [FAI], seem to drop their costumes as lovers of female liberation at the doors of their homes. Inside, they behave with their companeras just like common ‘husband’.”* (Kiraline, 1935). The main issue was that many anarchists acknowledged the problem of gender inequality and women oppression, and were keen to spread ideas of equal sexes, but they saw this problem as inherent to an authoritarian, capitalistic society. They supposed that emancipation would automatically follow from the social revolution and patriarchy would disappear. The ‘Mujeres Libres’ argued that these dominating relations would never simply dissolve after the revolution, and sought ways to actively join the anarchist revolution, thereby raising awareness of the gender issue.

The main themes were: a critique of the restriction of women’s role in society to that of reproduction; a critique of women’s second-class position both in mainstream society and in the anarchist movement; and, most importantly, a strategy for empowering women to participate fully in anarchist struggles. *Mujeres Libres* referred to this empowerment process as *capacitación*. (Ackelsberg, 1991). This was achieved through the education of women; many female workers were illiterate and had poor skills, but by setting up schools, women-only social groups and a women-only newspaper, women could gain self-esteem and confidence in their abilities and network with one another to develop their political consciousness. Through this, they were being prepared for their future leadership roles in anarchist movements. The women also set up programs to help themselves transition into the workforce, by providing them with necessary skills, in order to establish equality between sexes.

However short-lived (the aforementioned ‘anarchist society’ was swept away when Franco’s troops regained control over the area), the Mujeres Libres played an important role in women emancipation in Spain. “As women who’s particular needs had been neglected by

the larger society and by their libertarian comrades, the women of *Mujeres Libres* had a special commitment to the creation of a society that recognized and valued diversity. Empowerment would come through the struggle for the anarchist vision of coordination without hierarchy, diversity without inequality, and individuality with collectivity.” (Ackelsberg, 1991)

Criticizing Citizenship

The aforementioned notions that oppression and domination occurs on many levels, brings us to the concept of citizenship. Citizenship as a means of universalistic democratic rights of social and political participation, it should always “entail the full integration of all adults regardless of ‘race’, ethnicity, sex or creed.” (Walby, 1994) In reality however, we ascertain that “access to citizenship is a highly gendered and ethnically structured process.” (Walby, 1994)

There are many ways in which citizenship can be contested from both a feminist and an anarchist perspective. Yet two seem to be the most prominent: the issue of women’s access to the public sphere, and the crisis of the Westphalian concept of sovereignty and the nation-state. Citizenship should always imply both the fact of being ruled, but more importantly, the right to rule as well. The ideals of self-governance have been present in the construction of the concept since the Enlightenment and well before, in 5th century Athens, for instance. Self-governance “defines freedom as the rule of law among a community of equals who are citizens of the polis and who have the right to rule and to be ruled” (Benhabib, 2005). This notion is also connected to a territorially circumscribed nation-state. It is self-governance and territoriality that are being contested. Seyla Benhabib (2005) breaks citizenship down in three components: the collective identity of citizens along the lines of a shared language, religion, ethnicity, common history, and memories; the privileges of political membership in the sense of access to the rights of public autonomy; and the entitlement to social rights and privileges. This collective identity can serve as a means of exclusion, rather than inclusion, and, as discussed above, access to the rights of public autonomy is highly structured. Cindy Griffin (1996) commented on the matter, stating that

“Habermas, Sennett, Bitzer, Good-night, Hauser, and Hauser and Blair all suggest that the public sphere is a place, a location to which individuals must go in order to have their discourse heard. The public sphere, however, is more than a place. It also is as an ideology -- a reified pattern of explanations, a hierarchical ordering of location -- that functions to manage access to this realm.” She describes the mechanism of how women (and other excluded individuals, for that matter) need to be “symbolically reborn, ... usually at the hands or direction of a male” (Griffin, 1996), in order to gain access to what Habermas earlier described as “the sphere of private people come together as a public” (Habermas, 1991), with disregard of status and a general sense of inclusivity. Nancy Fraser remarked that this ‘bracketing’ of inequality masks underlying forms of subordination and domination (Fraser, 1990). Now that women suffrage is a widely accepted notion in Western democracies, the struggle for equal political rights and the ability to be heard in public forums, now goes far beyond the right to vote at the ballots.

The acknowledgement that the public sphere and thus citizenship is a highly structured and stratified concept, illustrates that forms of domination and asymmetrical power relations are inherent to the prevailing organisation of both the state and society. In ‘Resisting Citizenship’, Ackelsberg proposes several frameworks to rethink citizenship as a whole. On the mid-range level of analysis, one could learn lessons from Spain and utter that consciousness raising of both men and women can possibly provide new ways of organizing the public sphere. Whereas the male-dominated focus constantly yet latently stresses on hierarchical subject-object relations, a more inclusive way of politics with a focus on both solidarity and a connectivity with (rather than power over) others, might be an alternative approach. Patriarchy is not only inherent to the state but (supra) occurs even in supposedly gender-conscious affinity groups. This paper calls for the rethinking of interaction in every setting where politics ‘happen’, preferring bottom-up participation to replace current top-down mechanisms, in order to revalue the Social Contract and the abolition of institutionalized authority, which effectively reproduces inequality and patriarchy.

On a macro-level, the idea of a territorially defined nation-state is starting to lose both its meaning and its appeal. Yet the breakdown of the nation-state by (inter alia) globalization, is a very ambiguous process. The more McLuhan’s ‘global village’ becomes reality, the more

we attempt to close our borders and make citizenship inclusive for some, yet exclusive for many others. For example, within the European Union, it is now common that EU citizens can access public rights and participate at elections, thus undermining the traditional territorial sovereign state and the idea that some can benefit the privilege of political membership, even though they do not share a collective identity with the inhabitants of their host country. On the other hand, non-EU citizens are vigorously stopped at the borders, based on that very same principle that only 'members of the community' can benefit social rights and privileges. This transforms citizenship into an ambiguous instrument of exclusion rather than integration and inclusion. As Emma Goldman wrote almost a century ago (at a time when the U.S. Immigration Act declared that there were "four inadmissible classes: anarchists, epileptics, beggars, and importers of prostitutes"(Hing, 2003)) that "citizenship has become bankrupt: it has lost its essential meaning, its one-time guarantee. Deprivation of citizenship, exile and deportation are practiced by every government; they have been established and accepted methods. ... Yet, for all their "legality", denaturalization and expatriation are of the most primitive and cruel inhumanity." (Goldman, 2002)

One generally accepted idea in International Relations studies is that of global anarchy. Since there is no instance that has institutionalized authority (and the monopoly of violence to enforce that authority) over the different nation-states, it is said that the international community is one of anarchy. The current debate on the nature of the state revolves around whether the state is an agent or a structure and seems to have become stuck as regards to the ontological status of groups. Alex Prichard intervenes with Proudhon's work on the state: "Proudhon argued that the state is a group that, like all other social groups, is emergent from and irreducible to the historically and culturally distinct groupings of the individuals of which they are comprised." He notices that "The ontological consequences for a theory of anarchy and world politics are clear: if states are but one, relatively small if disproportionately powerful group among many and inter-state anarchy is a form of inter-group relations replicated at all social levels, the anarchy problematique is constitutive of politics as such. Anarchism is not the political ideology of disorder, but of autonomy – the autonomy of groups and individuals – and a framework for understanding how groups and individuals can relate without the need for states." (Prichard, 2010)

If we actually assume that the global community is one of many actors who socially interact with each other, we can use anarchism as a framework to understand the relations between states. In addition to that, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin and Geddes (Ward, 2005) argued, long before the 'crisis' of the Westphalian model of sovereignty, that regions, and not nations (a nation being a socially and deliberately constructed concept and an invention of the 19th century), should be the desired level to organize people. Contemporary trends of 'nationalism' are separatist rather than struggling for unison, as the centralized sovereignty and the constructed territoriality of the 'nation' starts to crumble. In this perspective, a (con)federal model of global politics with no centralized, all-encompassing level of authority, could prove worthy in the future, effectively broadening the already anarchist global community, tearing down the increasingly anachronistic concept of nation-states and thereby restructuring the concept of citizenship as a whole.

Conclusion

This paper tried to explore various anarchist approaches to gender, citizenship and international relations. Though far from exhaustive and not always coherent, it demonstrated, that the anarchist tradition can offer a framework for contemporary and relevant topics, which are much less alienated from mainstream thinking than often presumed. It is, on the other hand, also an invitation to rethink both prevailing dogma's *and* anarchism itself, to shape it into an instrument suitable to restructure current visions on organization on micro-, meso- and macro-levels of politics, economy and social interaction.

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