



Toward Broader Anarchist Geographies: Space/Place, Nation/State, and Anarchist Scholarship

Joshua Mullenite

Department of Culture and Economy, Wagner College
joshua.mullenite@wagner.edu

Abstract

This intervention tries to broaden the theoretical works considered under the framework of anarchist geographies. Currently, scholarship in anarchist geography draws from a limited body of writing for theoretical and practical insights, primarily (but not exclusively) from anarchists who were also geographers. However, people who have self-identified as anarchists, including those from cognate disciplines and those who are not part of academia, have dealt with several concepts of significant interest to geographers. I highlight some of these interventions as a means for suggesting a broader conceptualization of anarchist geography by considering the ways in which various anarchists have grappled with key concepts within geography, mainly focused on the nation and state. Specifically, I argue that further engagement with anarchist scholarship both from within academia and from outside academia's walls offers a means for understanding the operations of power at play from, within, and beyond the state in human relations.

Keywords

Anarchism; State; Nation; Space; Place



Introduction

The anarchist roots of geography and anarchism's potential to inform contemporary geographical scholarship have been well-argued in the pages of this journal and others, often leading to fierce debate (see Springer 2014; Harvey 2017). I share with Springer (2014) a concern over the state-centered logic embedded within much of radical geography, particularly in political ecology where such an approach has the potential to lead to conclusions which not only offer little hope for liberation but which also lead to a mode of analysis that forecloses on the radical possibilities of the present (see Mullenite 2016).¹ However, in the decade or so that has passed since I was introduced to the possibility of an anarchist academia, I have become weary of the citational practices of many of my academic comrades. This may seem like a minor quibble, but it nevertheless remains an essential and dangerously under-commented upon aspect of anarchist academic scholarship which leads to the potential to foreclose on radical possibilities, just as many Marxist or Marxian analyses. I agree with Mott and Cockayne (2017, 955) that "careful and conscientious citation is important because the choices we make about whom to cite – and who is then left out of the conversation – directly impact the cultivation of a rich and diverse discipline." However, I extend their ideas to ask: why should we limit our citations to geographers or academics when there is a whole written world available to help us burn down the myriad institutions of oppression we experience?

While I think there is a broader critique of anarchist geography looming in the background, and while this article in some ways reproduces citational practices which are not ideal, the intervention I am making here is specific: anarchist geographers ought to cite more anarchists who aren't professional geographers but instead draw from both the large anarchist scholarly tradition *and* the rich texts produced by anarchists. In the world of academia, there has been a simultaneously rich development of an anarchist academia that has grappled with questions still plaguing geography including environmental issues (e.g. Hall 2011; Morris 2015), the (dis-)location of the west in anarchist thought (Nugent 2012), the revolutionary disruption of socio-spatial norms (Purcell 2013), and how to methodologically commit to an emancipatory political vision (Ssorin-Chaikov 2012). Outside of academic circles, there are thousands of anarchists producing new theory informed by revolutionary practices and developing new practices based on insights both from anarchist academics and from interaction with a literal world of material conditions. Sethness-Castro's (2012) work on climate change, Crow's (2011) reflection on anarchist organizing in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Campaign to Fight Toxic Prison's (2016) bringing together work linking environmental justice with prison abolition and in the process amplifying the voices of incarcerated people are of easy inclusion for geographers but are not represented in most of the work published in anarchist geography. Additionally, the thousands of anonymous and pseudonymous zines on gentrification, radical ecology, border abolition, gender, sexuality, and a host of other topics should all be of obvious interest to even the most theoretical strains of academic anarchism but nevertheless remain underutilized (e.g., Anonymous n.d.; Do or Die 2003; Trotsky 2011; to name only a literal handful).

My focus on text is because the work emerging from anarchist social movements and practices are often derived from collective struggles and negotiated among groups. They represent ideas individuals and groups feel ready to be made public, which is not necessarily the case with other forms of "insurgent knowledges." This is especially true in insurrectionary spaces which are about

¹ I find extreme value in the insights of many Marxist scholars. I disagree with Springer (2014) to some extent on the existence of differences, but do not wish to enter that debate in this particular intervention in order to remain focused on anarchist geographies.

experimentation and often require repeated attempts and various experiences with success and failure before anything useful can be shared. As one reviewer rightfully pointed out, “anarchist academics and others have also been exploring radical, new ways in claiming old, vernacular knowledges while also producing new insurgent knowledges that are not always shared through text, much less concerned about text as a primary medium.” How these ideas are directly incorporated requires its own process of discussion and negotiation that is beyond the scope of this (and any) intervention.

In this article, I want to contend that these individuals and collectives, whether in academia or not, produce work that is likely more relevant to the present historical moment than Kropotkin and Reclus. Despite this, however, they are still marginal in anarchist geography. The most widely cited articles in the field all cite Kropotkin and most cite Reclus, but across the board they leave behind a number of relevant cases and theories from other disciplines and from a number of radicals and revolutionaries on the ground producing and documenting ideas equally worth engaging with.² This often includes marginalized voices who for a variety of reasons are kept from participating in traditional academic debate and discussion over the issues that affect their everyday lives.

While Clough and Blumberg (2012) have argued that anarchist geographies should look beyond the academy, there have been less sustained attempts to do so, with Heynen and Rhodes (2012) work with Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin being both a significant outlier and highlighting the theoretical and revolutionary potential of such an approach. In this intervention, I outline some of the areas in which anarchist geographers might engage with anarchism more broadly by focusing on four key and inter-related geographic terms: space/place, nation/state. In what follows, I work through these terms, highlighting the extant work by radicals both historical and contemporary which have, for the most part, received short shrift in anarchist geographical scholarship and whose work may offer significant theoretical and practical advancements of what is still a relatively niche subfield. My use of these terms is not meant to highlight the extent of this intervention, but instead to point to specific areas suitable for a broader approach. The breadth of anarchist geography could benefit from a similar intervention. Likewise, the examples chosen are those with which I am most familiar. It is my hope that the further inclusion of non-academic materials would help to spread revolutionary ideas within and between individual milieus.

Space/Place

Space is a central concern for anarchists well beyond the confines of anarchist geography. Whether in the more well-known form of Bey’s (1991) “temporary autonomous zones” in which an innumerable series of occupied spaces are reconfigured to anti-State ends (see also Newman 2011) or in the large scale imaginaries of anarchist Ukraine, Spain, or the revolutionary pockets of Rojava which have not yet been quashed by some state or another. Anarchist geography has, of course, considered this, as argued beautifully by both Ince (2012) and Springer (2012). However, anarchists are consistently claiming, reclaiming, and reconfiguring space to suit a variety of needs. In the process, they are producing new ideas about how these spaces are to be claimed and used, developing new and emancipatory politics of both inclusion and exclusion and are sharing this information amongst each other to collaborate further and critique.

As Goyens (2009) suggests, space often needs to be read into anarchist writings, both historical and contemporary, because anarchists are not quick to develop the terms and terminologies of academia.

² I have intentionally not cited these articles. The focus here is not to critique the work of these scholars but to highlight the broader theme in terms of the relative popularity of the subfield.

While Goyens is focused on actual anarchist spaces (in this case, infoshops, “autonomy clubs,” and beer halls where anarchists and their ideas could be more readily accepted), we could extend this concern further. In 2012, at an event put on by a Florida-based chapter of Food Not Bombs (which itself sought to reclaim the privatized spaces of the city in solidarity with the homeless), I was given a short zine titled *Short Circuit: Toward an Anarchist Approach to Gentrification*. The zine, only a dozen or so pages in length, adapted well-known arguments about gentrification from radical geographers to put forward concrete ways in which anarchists could reclaim urban space, fight for their neighbors, and in the process build autonomy from the state. The anonymous authors argue that beyond just an inflow of capital and an outflow of long-time, working class residents, “gentrification brings with it increased repression through the installation of additional CCTV surveillance cameras, the further commodification of public space, a broken window approach to politicking and the spread of private security. [...] [S]truggling against gentrification can represent a negotiation between the global and the local that ought to prefigure all anarchist thought and praxis.” Their argument is obviously geographical *and* spatial in nature and, significantly, highlights ways forward to advancing an anarchist approach to geographical scholarship developed outside the confines of academia.

The specifically anarchist arguments made in the zine also highlights arguments made by Cresswell (2015) and others about the importance of neighborhoods and communities in the process of place-making. Squatting, rioting, and community organizing are all central components to the anarchist approach to gentrification (see Drissel 2011) and are likewise well-developed in the literature on place and place-making as are the creation of infoshops and the appropriation of pubs for the purpose highlighted by Goyens (2009). Digging deeper into the work and ideas produced in these spaces could allow for the theoretical development of an anarchist sense of place, one which allows thinking through a variety of spatial contestations without relying solely on those which depend on interventions by state or capital.

At what point do such interventions become a valuable part of anarchist geography? It would not be surprising to see such articles cited a century from now (in an imaginary world not completely altered by climate change) noting with interest how anarchists from across North America shared ideas about gentrification and how to fight it both digitally and through zines which were often traded freely at fairs dedicated to the purpose. The archive, both in terms of its use in publishing works from the handful of historical anarchist geographers and in bringing forward their letters, have been significant in the development of contemporary anarchist geography. But websites like infoshop.org, libcom.org, and The Anarchist Library are filled with self-published articles and open letters to comrades that deserve equal critical attention.

Nation/State

Perhaps the most glaring omission from anarchist geography has been a detailed theoretical analysis of the origins, role, and potential of the state. The state was and remains a central institution within anarchist theory and practice, both in its form as shaping the limits of personal and interpersonal interactions along largely hierarchical lines as well as in the ways it produces sets of affects which inspire both despair and revolution. Anarchist geography is no different, with recent articles highlighting the current role and failure of the state to offer the ordered protections that it promises (see e.g. Araujo et al. 2017; Ince 2019).

Even though the state is at its core a geographical unit, it is not necessarily surprising that anarchist geography has not engaged with it deeply on a theoretical level. Kropotkin’s (2019) essay on the state remains in recent production and is widely cited in anarchist geographical scholarship and the work of anthropologists of the state such as Scott (1997; 2009; 2017) and Clastres (1989) remains of

extreme value and importance both in terms of their analyses of the state as a set of institutions but also in their demonstration of alternative non-state formations (see Ferretti 2018; Springer 2012). At the same time, this anthropological scholarship is far from settled and there are debates within anthropological theory about the role of the state in both anarchism and anthropology. Both Martin (2012) and Robinson and Tormey (2012), for example, argue that the appropriation of anthropological theories of non- and anti-state societies studied throughout the world within “actually-existing-anarchism” has historically pushed forward both anthropological theory and anarchist practices and reclamations of space against the state.

What is missing here is then not just a lack of engagement with other relevant academic traditions, but rather with the revolutionary tradition that is not affiliated with the norms of academia. Why, for example, has there not been equal attention paid to both the critique of the state, the attempt to build a viable alternative, and the various ways in which the actually-existing institutions of the state work to undermine these alternatives provided by radicals in places like Africa (Mbah and Igariwey 1997), Mexico (Hodges 1995), Venezuela (Uzcategui 2010), Cuba (Fernandez 2001; Shaffer 2019) or the Caribbean more broadly (Edwards 2014), or even within the United States (Crow 2011). More recent work, like Kadalie’s (2019) *Pan-African Social Ecology* brings this critique of the state to a transnational level, placing and articulating an anarchist tradition alongside one long claimed by Marxists and other state-focused socialists, addressing a key concern raised by Ince (2012) with regards to the need to look beyond the nation-state in anarchist geography. Kadalie himself is an interesting character in this regard as he is an academic who has largely eschewed formal academia, convening the Autonomous Research Institute for Direct Democracy and Social Ecology in order to better understand the relationship between revolutionary movements and the environments in which they occurred. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but the lack of visibility of this type of work in our scholarship does no one any favors.

Likewise, these works were often engaging with and directly confronting nationalisms, both mundane and revolutionary (e.g., Anderson 2005; Shaffer 2019; Uzcategui 2010). Anarchism’s direct confrontation with nationalism is, at this point, centuries-old (see especially Rocker 1937) so it is unsurprising that this would be the case. And there have been recent critiques of various forms of nationalism coming from anarchist geographers. Araujo et al. (2017) provides a particularly clear view on this as it represents several perspectives, but this is primarily a polemical intervention (in the same vein as this) and not necessarily an in-depth study of nationalism from an anarchist-geographical perspective. It would likewise not be difficult to find work by geographers and those in allied disciplines which researched anarchist groups that oppose nationalism, but how might the insights of these various groups be used to inform scholarship on a range of topics, bringing them in to the fold of the academic anarchist canon that has emerged through recent scholarship or to destroy the idea of a canon altogether?

Conclusion

Without the specific engagement of work being produced by those who are not necessarily engaged in academic knowledge production, geographers in general and anarchist geographers are creating a situation that has the potential to limit our theoretical insights into our very core ideas. As Martin (2012) has shown, engaging with this work offers the opportunity to push the boundaries of our understanding, creating not only new scholarly insights in conversation with comrades and interlocutors typically left out of such discussions. It also works to flatten the space highlighted here, in which academic or scholarly work is considered separately from work produced by anarchists engaged in what are typically protracted and extremely situated struggles. This is especially significant in that there is really crucial work being done by BIPOC and anarchist geography (and the academy as a whole) has a problem with being dominated by white, cisgendered, men. Even in my own scholarship, though I read

and implicitly draw on ideas that I find in zines, flyers, pamphlets, and even music, I don't often incorporate them directly into the work I produce that might be called scholarly (i.e., the work that "counts" when it comes to applying for academic jobs, grants, etc.). This form of silo-ing anarchist literature is not that significant in the political long run, but that is not reason enough to keep it in place.

The solution is not, however, to simply add a new list of publications to cite but to instead draw on the vast bodies of knowledge that inform our individual praxes, sometimes through released texts and others through communal negotiation as Reviewer 1 suggested above. The sources included here are a result of my own experiences detailing the histories of workers self-management in the Caribbean and in anti-gentrification social movements, for example. I would not necessarily expect others to be familiar with them but hope that they provide spaces through which anarchist geography (and hopefully anarchist thought in general) can grow. Likewise, it is the sincere hope of this intervention that an increased focus on other works not only makes anarchist geography more representative, but also brings forward a range of ideas that can help toward building a better future.

References

- Anderson, Benedict. 2005. *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*. London, UK: Verso.
- Anonymous. n.d. *Short Circuit: Towards an Anarchist Approach to Gentrification*. Zine.
- Araujo, Erin, Federico Ferretti, Anthony Ince, Kelvin Mason, Joshua Mullenite, Jenny Pickerill, Toby Rollo, and Richard J. White. 2017. Beyond Electoralism: Reflections on Anarchy, Populism, and the Crisis of Electoral Politics. *ACME: An International Journal of Critical Geographies* 16 (4): 607–42.
- Bey, Hakim. 1991. *The Temporary Autonomous Zone: Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.
- Campaign to Fight Toxic Prisons. 2016. *Plantation Rising: A publication on resistance and liberation in Florida prisons and beyond*. Zine.
- Clastres, Pierre. 1989. Society Against the State. In *Society Against the State*, 189-218. New York: Zone Books.
- Clough, Nathan and Renata Blumberg. 2012. Toward Anarchist and Autonomist Marxist Geographies. *ACME: An International Journal of Critical Geographies* 11(3): 335-351.
- Cresswell, Tim. 2015. *Place: An Introduction*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell.
- Crow, Scott. 2011. *Black Flags and Windmills: Hope, Anarchy, and the Common Ground Collective*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Do or Die. 2003. *Down with the Empire! Up with the Spring!* Zine.
- Drissel, David. 2011. "Anarchist Punks Resisting Gentrification: Countercultural Contestations of Space in the New Berlin." *The International Journal of the Humanities* 8(10): 19-44.
- Edwards, Joseph. 2014. *Workers' Self-Management in the Caribbean: The Writings of Joseph Edwards*. Atlanta, GA: On Our Own Authority Publishing.
- Fernandez, Frank. 2001. *Cuban Anarchism: The History of a Movement*. Tuscon, AZ: See Sharp Press.

- Ferretti, Federico. 2018. Teaching Anarchist Geographies: Elisée Reclus in Brussels and ‘The Art of Not Being Governed.’ *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108 (1): 162–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2017.1339587>.
- Goyens, Tom. 2009. Social space and the practice of anarchist history. *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 13(4): 439-457.
- Hall, Matthew. 2011. Beyond the Human: Extending Ecological Anarchism. *Environmental Politics* 20 (3): 374–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2011.573360>.
- Harvey, David. 2017. ‘Listen, Anarchist!’ A personal response to Simon Springer’s ‘Why a radical geography must be anarchist.’ *Dialogues in Human Geography* 7(3): 233-250.
- Heynen, Nik and Jason Rhodes. 2012. Organizing for Survival: From the Civil Rights Movement to Black Anarchism through the Life of Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 11(3): 393-412.
- Hodges, Donald C. 1995. *Mexican Anarchism after the Revolution*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Ince, Anthony. 2019. Fragments of an Anti-Fascist Geography: Interrogating Racism, Nationalism, and State Power. *Geography Compass*, no. December 2018: e12420. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12420>.
- Kadale, Modibo. 2019. *Pan-African Social Ecology: Speeches, Conversations, and Essays*. Atlanta, GA: On Our Own Authority Publishing.
- Kropotkin, Peter. 2019. The State: Its Historic Role. In *Anarchism, Anarchist Communism, and the State: Three Essays*, 85-146. Oakland: PM Press.
- Martin, Keir. 2012. The ‘Potlatch of Destruction’: Gifting against the State. *Critique of Anthropology* 32 (2): 125–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X12437861>.
- Mbah, Sam and I.E. Igariwey. 1997. *African Anarchism: The History of a Movement*. Tuscon, AZ: See Sharp Press.
- Morris, Brian. 2015. *Anthropology, Ecology, and Anarchism: A Brian Morris Reader*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Mott, Carrie and Daniel Cockayne. 2017. Citation matters: mobilizing the politics of citation toward a practice of ‘conscientious engagement.’ *Gender, Place, and Culture* 24(7): 954-973.
- Newman, Saul. 2011. Postanarchism and space: Revolutionary fantasies and autonomous zones. *Planning Theory* 10(4): 344-365.
- Nugent, Stephen. 2012. Anarchism out West: Some Reflections on Sources. *Critique of Anthropology* 32 (2): 206–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X12437860>.
- Purcell, Mark. 2013. A New Land: Deleuze and Guattary and Planning. *Planning Theory & Practice* 14 (1): 20–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2012.761279>.
- Robinson, Andrew, and Simon Tormey. 2012. Beyond the State: Anthropology and ‘Actually-Existing-Anarchism.’ *Critique of Anthropology* 32 (2): 143–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X12438779>.
- Rocker, Rudolf. 1937. *Nationalism and Culture*. New York: Rocker Publication Committee.
- Schaffer, Kirwin. 2019. *Anarchist Cuba: Countercultural Politics in the Early Twentieth Century*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.

- Scott, James C. 1997. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Scott, James C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Have: Yale University Press.
- Scott, James C. 2017. *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the First Agrarian States*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sethness-Castro, Javier. 2012. *Imperiled Life: Revolution against Climate Change*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Springer, Simon. 2012. Anarchism! What Geography Still Ought to Be. *Antipode* 44(5): 1605-1624.
- Springer, Simon. 2014. Why a radical geography must be anarchist. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 4(3): 249-270.
- Ssorin-Chaikov, Nikolai. 2012. Writing Power: An Anarchist Anthropologist in the Looking Glass of Critical Theory. *Critique of Anthropology* 32 (2): 189–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X12439486>.
- Trotsky, Neon. 2011. *Race and Border: The Two-Headed Ogre of White Supremacy*. Zine
- Uzcategui, Rafael. 2010. *Venezuela: Revolution as Spectacle*. Tuscon, AZ: See Sharp Press.