

Radical leftists, I'll have another beer with you!

By Jens Störfried

After many years of defining myself as an anarchist and dealing with numerous kinda-left and occasionally radical left people because we share values and ideas, I am now amazed that I am still convinced that understanding must be possible between the different currents. That I assume this is certainly due to the fact that many anarchist people participate as a matter of course in the radical wing of social movements and anarchism is also commonly seen as a radical left current. In fact, viewed with some distance, this is absurd. Under the label "radical left" are understood old and new state communists, up to Stalinists, the autonomists, parts of left parties and so-called movement leftists.

It is also used to stigmatize various groups, NGOs and initiatives and to lock them out of the democratic cage. At the same time, some alternative, studies, crustpunks, hipsters or individual politicians consider themselves "radical leftists. They feed on radical chic, build themselves up on historical and media-produced myths and appeal to youthful thirst for action. That many anarchists find themselves in such circles is therefore no coincidence. Fortunately, due to the disillusionment with state socialism, the successes of social movements and their practices, the history of autonomists and emancipatory educational work, authoritarian positions in these contexts are largely discredited and forced to justify themselves.

If, on the other hand, proven anarchists appear, who not only wear the (A) on the patch on their punk clothes or as a button on their cap, but also engage in the conversation, this often leads, strangely enough, to irritation in the more or less radical left bubble. And no one likes a break with habits, procedures and supposedly established views. The accusation is then quickly raised that anarchists do not have complex theories with which they can grasp social conditions and align their strategy accordingly. Yes, anarchists have not so much arrogant academic blokes like Marxists in particular. Nevertheless, there are anarchist theories, independent ways of thinking and understanding things. It would be good if anarchists would become aware of their own theory and develop it together. This has nothing to do with a scientific career ladder, but can happen far away from universities.

Through their hostility to theory, which they wrongly justify with a hatred of any institutions, some anarchists gamble away being taken seriously and becoming relevant and self-determined actors themselves. They compensate for their lack of self-reflection, obliviousness to history, and unwillingness to engage in productive debate with romantic kitsch, the problematic celebration of their (often post-bourgeois) subjectivity, a fetishization of "deeds" that feel "real," and the display of rebellious phrases. No wonder, then, that their radical leftist friends feel confirmed in their prejudices against anarchism. However, this does not stop them from willingly adopting elements of anarchist theory and the rebellious habitus and integrating them into their - communist or social-democratic -

theories and positions. This leads to the strange constellation that numerous figures of thought, styles and practices that originated in anarchism are widespread in the somehow left-wing and radical left scenes today in the form of rudiments, but in the same course anarchism can hardly establish itself (in the German-speaking area) as an independent project.

Anarchists usually share the same values with other socialists, even if the agendas of how these should or can be implemented and lived often diverge. Those who can only think idealistically think that this is a question of different "ideas", which in fact are only a surface phenomenon. I realize again and again that I have a lot in common with left-wing radicals. However, I am all the more disturbed that we often draw such different conclusions from our shared values, knowledge and histories. This has something to do with our self-image, indeed with our own relationship to society and politics. Anarchists do not see themselves as an extra-parliamentary opposition. They rely on a voluntary and decentralized self-organization from below and emphasize the autonomy of the actors. To come to this point of view, it means to have had the experience of being outside of this system and its logics - and to take this position as a starting point for one's own critique and practice within the society of which we are always a part.

This is where opinions differ. Radical leftists often find it difficult to comprehend what it is like, beyond seemingly radical phrases, to say no to the state and domination in general; to reject them. Even as radical leftists, they still relate too strongly, to existing political institutions, mindsets and practices, rather than truly self-organizing and self-determining. There can be no such thing as a 'just' social order. But another, clearly better one: A federative network of decentralized autonomous communities, in which those associated in them organize themselves voluntarily and horizontally. "Rejecting any order" is nothing more than an adolescent affect to which many left-wing radicals also succumb, who, according to Marxist or nihilist - i.e. post-bourgeois - dogmas, believe that negation is everything. Certainly we do not need a "revolutionary mass". But we can orient and form ourselves here and now in a social-revolutionary way, take ourselves seriously in it, take responsibility and fight for emancipatory aspirations.

In this respect, anarchism was and is part of the plural socialist movement. In this there are numerous contradictions and also differences. Being "leftist" is not a criterion for anything. But neither is being an anarchist. It depends on what people do and how they do it. Sure, people can claim to consistently reject the state and domination. Without a well-founded social critique, however, this is only an empty radical leftist shell, which is not filled with content. Anti-authoritarian communists are sometimes more honest in scaling down their grandiose claims, precisely so that they can aim at the whole. In doing so, however, they are dealing with the homemade contradiction between "revolutionary" and "reformist" orientation. Anarchists strive to resolve this contradiction, because from the perspective of self-organization and self-determination, there need not be a contradiction between the two if prefigurative politics is pursued. This means that means and goals are always aligned and a pragmatic

everyday practice is combined with the great longing for anarchy. They can bring this specificity to the diversity of the plural radical and emancipatory scene.

Nevertheless, anarchism does not necessarily have to be part of the radical left at any price. What is important is that anarchists define themselves - just like other currents and social groups and classes affected by oppression, exploitation and alienation. If one considers oneself hostile to the state, it is crucial to understand it as a relation of domination. To refuse it means to abolish the society that is formed by domination and through which it is maintained. This per se cannot be done through purely individual acts, even though subjective distancing is a starting point for self-determination and its effects should not be underestimated. This is also a precondition for adopting a truly confrontational stance and developing autonomous approaches. This means not orienting oneself first to what framework conditions the state prescribes, how people are supposed to do politics, what can be communicated, or what is supposedly strategically right based on analysis. It means to determine oneself in autonomous groups instead of joining a party or swimming along at its edge. It means living up to one's own ethical standards, organizing in an egalitarian way, connecting one's own life to autonomous (anti)politics, and producing direct action. Crucial here, however, is to relate to others who are doing similar things.

The struggle for the realization of social freedom has very concrete effects on the living conditions of people who, as struggling subjects, reclaim their dignity. When the different fields of struggle and groupings are related to each other and common visions are developed from their experiences, the concrete utopia of a new social order also emerges. To visualize in detail would be an idealistic pipe dream or potentially totalitarian ideology to "improve" the world. To reject it is an anti-authoritarian reflex, which starts from the negative, i.e. liberal, understanding of freedom and in its belief in an "absolute uncompromisingness" towards "every order and morality" ultimately merely reflects the isolation and fatalism of bourgeois individuals.

With the concrete utopia of a horizontal, decentralized, voluntary social order in mind and heart, anarchists confront radical leftists with their own claims. They are indeed convinced that the domination-free society is desirable and possible, and even see it beginning everywhere - albeit usually quite small, contradictory and fractured. This is what many radical leftists don't get, because they postpone their social utopia of a perfect, harmonious world until the day of never-never and can never see mature conditions for it to dawn. The radical rejection of domination occasionally frightens left-wing radicals, who think: "That's not what I meant! What is your overall concept?" Or: "But who is supposed to take over the leadership?"

As mentioned, anarchism was and is, along with communism and social democracy, a main current of the socialist movement. In terms of ethical values, there is a common denominator, but in reality, views diverge widely. We should look for the common ground, but we will not always find it. It is valuable and meaningful when different currents, groups and individuals, locate and define themselves without

clinging to identities because of it. Instead of defining themselves in distinction from others - which is a major reason for the unspeakable form of "critique" in radical leftist scenes - they can define themselves starting from themselves. As far as communism is concerned, there are essential ideas that anarchists share with it. However, they do not understand it as an economic and social order that could be introduced, but as lived practices of collective self-management, of need-oriented production and distribution of goods that we all need. The self-determination and self-development of all individual human beings is the great goal of all anarchists. This should not happen in a distant day, but already today. How it can be achieved and implemented, there are again different views. How should it be different when different people come together?

Anyone who feels restricted by every group and self-imposed rule; rigidly rejects every authority transferred voluntarily, for a period of time and according to competence, and then still believes himself to be "free of ideology" did not understand the basic conditions of the society and order of domination in which we live, and does not want to show a way to emancipation from it. I know that sounds arrogant. But it is also important to say that individualism and nihilism alone lead to a dead end. Wandering loners are part of the problem and not its solution. Consequently, they fight the society that created them, and thus strive towards their self-abolition. However, one must first be able to afford this privileged attitude. For most of the people affected by exploitation, oppression and alienation, the improvement of their living conditions is a necessity, which can only be achieved by overcoming the existing social order. This does not mean to start from a mass, neither to construct it nor to address it. However, different people in different social groups and classes can relate to each other and fight together for radical, comprehensive and lasting change. Anarchist groups can seek (potentially) very important tasks in this regard by engaging in direct action, disseminating skills, writing up stories, providing education and experiences, engaging diverse groups in dialogues, starting productive disputes, and developing collaborative discussions around strategies and visions.

Whether anarchists see themselves as part of "the" radical left, which as a supposedly unified subject is a fiction and a construct anyway, is less important. Presumably, however, with their approaches and practices they will repeatedly encounter and also work together with various radical leftists. Understandably, clear lines must also be drawn. They cannot create common ground with Stalinists, Maoists or anti-Semitic leftists. But even beyond that, it is important for anarchists to define their own project anew and starting from themselves. Away with the talk of an "united front" of the authoritarian left, because it was always a lie and leads nowhere! Please, please, finally stop with the we-are-all-left insanity, as propagated by the leftist movements. You party leftists, don't bore us with the old moralistic argument that we are responsible for the rise of the right. Forget it, you leftist strategists can't include us anarchists in your oh-so-clever mosaic fantasies, and you leftist theorists don't need to explain the world to us and what we should and shouldn't do in it. That's why anarchists will remain annoying tormentors against all assumed authority and leadership - be it radical left or other contexts. Anarchists have their own traditions, histories, experiences, ways of thinking, practices and networks.

They may or may not overlap with various radical left people and groups. Whether that is seen as good or bad depends on the particular intersections and whether people are merely feasting on their identities or taking self-conscious positions.

That's why I perceive an ambivalent relationship between anarchists and the anti-authoritarian radical left. May they determine themselves and always work together where it is meaningful and practicable!

Original title „Radikale Linke, ich trinke noch ein Bier mit dir!“. A persiflage on: "Radical left, I separate myself from you!" [„Radikale Linke, ich trenne mich von dir!"], which was published in a German-speaking „insurrectionalist“ publication.