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Book Review

Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy, edited by Randall Amster, Abraham DeLeon, Luis Fernandez, II, Anthony J. Nocella, II, and Deric Shannon. New York: Routledge, 2009. Pp. 336.

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CONTEMPORARY ANARCHIST STUDIES: AN INTRODUCTORY ANTHOLOGY OF ANARCHY IN THE ACADEMY¹

Although the history and theory of the anarchist movement remains relatively unknown in official intellectual circles, some still seem disturbed by establishing a hybridization between the academy and anarchism—two worlds that are so different in principle. But already in the 1970s, the anarchist Diego Abad de Santillán wrote in the preface to a work by one of his disciples, Fidel Miró:

Anarchism, as humanism, is today more relevant than ever, more than at the time of its delivery to the labor movement, more than during the outbursts of heroic rebellion, more than in the era of its exemplary role during the war. It finds its resurgence in modern thought, philosophy, and sociology; among economists and thinkers of all languages and climates; in the nonconformist youth that is shaking the old pillars of society that refuses to be community. All this will and should be reinforced by anarchism like a humanist flag, without adjectives. Here lie the root and the strength to build a better world, a world of the twenty-first century in which we live already.²

¹ A review of *Contemporary Anarchist Studies. An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy*, London, Routledge 2009, 318 pp. Abbreviated as CAS.

² MIRÓ, Fidel, *El anarquismo, los estudiantes y la revolución*, México, Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1969, pp.20-21. The translation is mine.

The words of the Spanish anarchist Diego Abad de Santillán contain the key to the book reviewed below. To speak today about "anarchism without adjectives" is to discover the richness and heterogeneity of endless global anarchist movements, the character of which fills all areas of life, and to create from this variety a unique humanist project that provides a soul to what is by definition—we are told—heartless; i.e. the capitalist machinery.

A number of academic disciplines have emerged from an analysis of anarchist movements. They changed (and continue to change) our understanding of the theory, methodology, pedagogy, practice, and the future of anarchism. *Contemporary Anarchist Studies* consists of over thirty contributions by students, academics, independent researchers and activists. The structure of the collection goes from educational and theoretical anarchism to anarchism in the streets, although it would have been more *natural* to go the other way round, from the practical to the theoretical; that is, from the streets to the academia. Using a metaphor from biology, it can be argued that a function makes an organ. The collection, in fact, acknowledges this direction when addressing the revival of the study of anarchism, which is considered not as the result of an increased interest in anarchism in the academy but rather as a consequence of praxis: "Anarchist theory has always been intimately tied with its practice" (CAS, p.9). Or put in another way, academic discourses have not changed the reality, but the reality has changed academic discourses: "anarchism has grown theoretically as a result of its engagement with other perspectives. Queer theory, critical race theory, feminism, radical environmentalism, animal liberation, post-structuralism, and a host of other perspectives have left indelible marks on contemporary anarchist theories" (CAS, p.9). Within this contemporary theoretical complexity, one of the most important intellectual challenges is knowing how to adapt to the novelties without abandoning anarchist principles; this adaptation is given, first, by reflection on: "[...] the possibility (or impossibility) of an anarchist methodology" (CAS, p.71).

In the opening parts of the collection, we are asked to be suspicious of the most popular methods used by humanists. We would be naïve to think that the methods used by social sciences go beyond the model imposed by capitalism, a model that promotes uncritical ideology non-destructive of capitalist values. (However, to destroy those values has an intellectual price: as Jeff Ferrell puts it, if one does not research according to official methods, one's work is condemned to mysteriously suffer from a "[...] bureaucratic constipation and career delay" (CAS, p.76)). The classical model, by following the scale of points established by the capitalist system, is socially sterile because it falls into solipsism. It uses an exclusive language, incomprehensible to the general public (CAS, p.78), and its method is dehumanized (CAS, p.79). It promotes the "tyranny" of math, dates, data, and facts without taking into account a wide range of things that are denied or relegated to ideological indifference, such as "feelings, attitudes and life circumstances." These sub-questions or issues are treated poorly in the academy from a humanistic point of view and their oversight causes indifference, coldness, and a lack of attention paid to problems that, in fact, concern the collective imagination.

The classical model also separates theory and practice. Paul Routledge, for example, proposes instead to live theory beyond words, to dissent and conflict. According to him, the ignorance of the human in the academy leads to the avoidance of group thinking and manifests itself by a dangerous and domineering "one voice" in methods, contents and discourses developed both in

the academy and society. Against this dominant discourse, the author prefers to speak about *affinity*. In his view, affinity “consists of a group of people sharing common ground and who can provide supportive, sympathetic spaces for its members to articulate their ideas, listen to one another, and share concerns, emotions, or fears. The politics of affinity enables people to provide support and solidarity for one other” (CAS, pp.84-85). Routledge argues that from affinity originates the notion of *consensus*, and from consensus originates *mutual solidarity*. Emotions, the “interior life of politics,” return to have unprecedented prominence, making the teacher (a passive agent in the older models) to commit politically and actively to the subject he or she investigates, to make things with words: “It is our ability to transform our feelings about the world into actions that inspires us to participate in political action” (CAS, p.87). The boundaries between the academic and the activist disappear, and so does the figure of an expert, because its existence is incompatible with honesty between what is said and what is done.

Following this line, Luis A. Fernandez argues that whenever possible, the academic should “be there” exercising what he calls “participant observation.” It is important to be present in situations which raise issues of concern to the academy because one can understand firsthand what one has studied for years in the abstract. Following this advice, according to Fernandez, results in a strategic reconciliation between the heart and the brain, and leads to their synthesis into one organ. From this organ, it becomes possible to uproot the old myth of objectivity and in its place implant compassion and connectivity: “Rather than detachment and objectivity, we therefore should seek connectivity and compassion, values that dovetail well with anarchist sensibilities such as cooperation and mutual aid” (CAS, p.95). Fernandez also chooses to blur the lines between the participant, the scholar, and the activist, advocating the use of inductive method: going from the particular to the general, or: “In other words, to go from the specific to the general without losing sight of what makes the specific circumstance unique” (CAS, p.97). So should we give up all the rigor and professionalism of the academy? His answer is negative. What the author recommends is to work through a real *immersion*. He writes:

The goal was to immerse myself in the protest, become a protester, and develop a theoretical understanding of the situation based on that immersion. While I recognized the impossibility of entering the field *tabula rasa*, I did attempt to put aside academic ideas and theories regarding the movement, hoping that this would produce a deep experience of the situation, resulting in valuable new insights. (CAS, p.98)

Finally, Fernandez proposes to introduce Max Weber’s term *Verstehen*: a term that connect intentions, passions and experiences of the objects studied (CAS, p.99). This maneuver does not condemn social sciences, but rather popularizes them and brings them closer. Of course, it requires a redefinition of what it means to be an intellectual anarchist.

Similarly, David Graeber stresses that many of those who call themselves anarchists or anarchist thinkers are forgetting that thought without action is socially irrelevant and, accordingly, a hypocrisy. He argues that if anarchism is now accepted as a movement that moves under the principles of an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice, then we must act in accordance with what is being preached (CAS, p.106). This, of course, is something unthinkable in the traditional university, committed, as Foucault said, to the *colonization of our souls* (C, p.124).

Given this new theoretical and pedagogic paradigm there are always reluctances and attacks. An extreme example is found in the ultraconservative Carl Schmitt. In one of his books, he compared the anarchist to the figure of the partisan³--a professional revolutionary who is unarmed, without a uniform and military training, but aided by his group of people, mobile and so committed to his or her ideals that s/he is willing to die for them. Someone might object that erasing the borders between the world of the academy and anarchist militancy is to agree with Schmitt that academics become something like partisans in a permanent state of war. One could respond to such an attack with the words of Norbert Elias, who claimed:

Only small children and, among adults, perhaps the insane, absolutely commit with their attitude and their experiences, unconditionally dropping their feelings here and now; and it is also solely among the insane where we can find absolute distance; only they can hold total indifference towards what happens around them. Normally, the behavior of adults is within a scale ranging between these two extremes.⁴

Accordingly, we should understand the collection *Contemporary Anarchist Studies* as a set of tools to fight, by means of education, for a future that would be egalitarian, post-capitalist, and post-state. To those ends, nothing works better than establishing the right balance between distance and commitment: Commitment to peace; ecology; the development of forms that would avoid exclusion, marginalization and abuse of power; organization of life without hierarchy; and, ultimately, commitment to building a better world.

Finally, there is one more potential threat that the authors of the collection may have lost sight of: Is not the resurgence of anarchism within the academy an attempt by capitalism to absorb, assimilate and thus neutralize the presumed vitality and independence of this movement? Against such an accusation, the contributors seem to say, we must be like old Socrates: we must become active gadflies that sting and stir the dormant revolutionary consciousness of our fellow citizens, students and, especially, of ourselves. And this is because: "Even under the most favorable scenario, anarchists will have to respond to the re-emergence of patterns of domination within and/or among communities, even if at a certain point in time they have been consciously overcome. Eternal vigilance will remain the price of liberty" (CAS, p.257).

³ Cf. SCHMITT, Carl, *Teoría del partisano*, Madrid, Centro de Estudios Políticos Constitucionales, 1966.

⁴ ELIAS, Norbert, *Compromiso y distanciamiento. Ensayos de sociología del conocimiento*, Barcelona, Ediciones Península, 2002, p.20. The translation is mine.