

Post-Anarchism as a Tool for Queer and Transgender Politics and/or Vice Versa?

Lena Eckert

as power is diffuse, resistance must be as well
(Phelan 1993: 767)

‘Anarchism is chaos’ – that is what most people think when they hear ‘anarchism’ – it is a form of politics that most people are scared of - actually I would rather like to call it a form of becoming rather than a form of politics - a form of thinking, indeed a form of organization of life. Anarchism is often mistakenly associated with chaos and with violence; I think it is quite the contrary: it is the wish for the most peaceful and unenslaved form of existing together. I want to argue, that anti-anarchist images and discourses represent the very common fear of a loss of clear-cut hierarchical power structures and the loss of privileges and established societal structures for some people.

However, queer theory, transgender activism¹ and feminism have already tackled these power structures as binary, heteronormative and patriarchal which is my initial reason to propose an alliance between those different theoretical approaches that is queer and transgender activism and theory and the philosophy of anarchism to societal change. In this essay I want to discuss a new take that can be found in post-anarchism which could be useful for queer and feminist politics. This involves rearticulating the political agenda of traditional anarchism which has long been pursued by a masculinist and heteronormative movement but also a reconsideration of queer and transgender politics and feminism as identity movements. I will first introduce the new conceptualization that post-anarchism, inspired by post-structuralism has found in recent years and will then think about a new subjectivity which could emerge from these notions. Finally I will interrogate implications for the problem of identity and will then introduce strategies which could follow from all these different issues.

¹ I am here including specific intersex activisms, which aim at the transformation of the binary sexed society, into transgender activism

In 2001 Cathy Cohen, a queer theorist, argued that our new politics must be committed to left analysis and left politics. She furthermore suggests that queer people need to search for a new political direction. This new direction for her is not focused on an integration into dominant structures but instead seeks to transform the basic fabric and hierarchies that enable the persistent systems of oppression to operate efficiently - she argues for a different kind of intervention which aims at transforming the very basis of supposedly democratic and egalitarian societies. I read this as very much related to anarchist philosophies. But first I want to introduce the difference between traditional and post-anarchism.

Original, orthodox or traditional anarchism as a philosophical system relies on specific notions of the subject, of power, history, freedom, ethics and society. Anarchism rejects the power of the state, which is theorized by the concept of *statism* just as Marxism uses the concept of *economy* to conceptualize its politics. However, traditional anarchism does not reject any form of authority; traditional anarchism does believe in, and obeys a 'natural law'. This 'natural law' is opposed to 'artificial law' (Bakunin) and is the natural human essence which is the foundation for the subject's supposedly naturally cooperative, sociable, and altruistic, rather than aggressively competitive and egoistic and egocentric constitution. 'Artificial law' is the sort of power which is exercised over the 'naturally free' subject by institutions such as the state, governments, the church and man-made laws. Therefore, in traditional anarchism power is conceptualized as being outside the subject, as being imposed on it and as being opposed to the actual nature of the subject just as much as in proper enlightenment or humanist discourses. To be able to free the subject, resistance against this artificial power is necessary. Moreover, this resistance is seen as an intrinsic characteristic of the subject, the anarchist vision is that the natural 'morality and rationality' of the subject will support the revolution and will eventually lead to a replacement of governments by 'man and society'. The concept of power, which anarchism is based upon, is that power has an outside from which it can be criticized and therefore likewise has an alternative to be replaced by. The subjects which are responsible for this new society are envisioned in an essentially optimistic framework, they are determined to help each other mutually and they do not need a state to regulate their collective existence. This is a rather romantic worldview and not just that – it is exclusive and also intrinsically problematic as I will try to show.

Of course, from a queer theoretical perspective there are several problems to be detected concerning conceptualizations of the ‘natural’ subject and ‘the top-down-model’ of power and their mutual relationship. However, post-anarchism has worked with these problems and has incorporated poststructuralist notions. In the following I will elaborate on the theories which have helped post-anarchist theorists to reformulate subjectivity, identity and power while keeping in touch with the original idea of anarchism whatever that is – I do admit I don’t know but I still want to challenge a little bit of resistance here towards a set of practices, as I would like to call it, that has been deemed so dangerous to democracy -the holy cow of the West – that, as the supposedly best form of organization of society, has to be exported into the Rest of the World.

The post-anarchist Lewis Call argues that the more orthodox anarchist thinkers such as Bakunin and Kropotkin, even though these thinkers also differ immensely from each other, focus on power structures which operate on a state or economic level while being ignorant towards other power relations such as sexuality, gender, race and other social relations. In contrast, the concept and approach of postmodern anarchism views capitalism and statism (the organization of people on specific parts of the world by governments and borders) not as causes but as effects, not as diseases but as symptoms. It furthermore challenges an entire psychology which is assumed to be universal and an entire semiotic structure (that is the attribution of meaning through language and symbols) and which underwrite the dominant system of political economy.

Of course, this claim needs a different conceptualization of power and of the subject which is why post-anarchists have drawn on writers such as Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari to adapt their politics to current society. This current society, in my opinion, is coined by what Foucault has called ‘bio-power’ and therefore by regulations and productions concerning the body and sexuality which makes this agenda highly interesting for feminism, queer and transgender theory. Bio-power is responsible for the making of sexed subjects which are defined by their bodies. These bodies must be made docile, usable, effective, productive, erotic, etc. This process is a productive one and rests on normative and normalizing discursive practices. Power in general, as Foucault has theorized it is not localisable and stable, it is fluid

and happens everywhere in every interaction, in every social encounter; power is located *in* us we are indeed produced by it. From a post-anarchist view ‘the State’s power is really based on *our* power’ (Newman 2001: 158) and resistance against the State must accordingly involve rejection of unified and essentialist identities. The critique of this kind of identity already leads to the attempt to go away from existing political categories and to create new ones. It can also be seen in the light of a reconceptualization of the field of politics ‘beyond its present limits by unmasking the connections that can be formed between resistance and the power being resisted’ (Newman 2001: 159, 160).

This means that there will never be a strategy of resistance which we can trust. Strategies have to be interrogated as soon as they have been applied as they might only work temporarily and in certain situations and settings. In this regard poststructuralist thinkers like Lyotard, Deleuze and Foucault can be seen to contribute to a ‘new anarchism’ which ‘retains the idea of intersecting and irreducible local struggles, of a wariness about representation, of the political as investing the entire field of social relationships, and of the social as a network rather than a closed holism, a concentric field, or a hierarchy’ (May 1994: 85). So we need to go utopian – since this is about creation beyond the existing – beyond existing identities!

The concept of a closed and hermetic, stable and coherent identity would contradict this kind of political struggle, making it impossible. Deleuze and Guattari see subjectivity not as a fixed, stable identity but as a field of immanence and becoming which enables a plurality of differences. We can see postanarchism as a set of conscious practices and actions, through which one can reinvent everyday life and identities accordingly. Poststructuralist political theory replaces the orthodox anarchist approaches to politics and power with the idea that power is produced at the same time as it rules and regulates, power has a ‘positivity or creativity’ (May 1994: 87). As Foucault puts it, ‘power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power’ (Foucault 1980, 98). Recognizing this creativity of power means constantly reformulating one’s agenda and one’s points of departure. In the following I want to describe queer theory’s pitfalls in regard to the re-installment of identity categories and power structures which I see as preventing queer politics from being able to foster a general change in society. One of these

pitfalls I see in the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual identity positions and subsequent notions of belonging and of coalition building.

For many of us, the label “queer” symbolizes and acknowledges that through our existence and everyday survival we embody sustained and multisided resistance to systems (based on dominant constructions of race and gender) that seeks to normalize our sexuality, exploit our labor, and constrain our visibility. At the intersection of oppression and resistance lies the radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics. (Cohen 2001. 203)

I would add to this quote that it should bring all those people together who are deemed marginal *because of their liberatory politics*. Queer politics at its very beginning held the promise that it provides a space for ‘antiassimilationist activists committed to challenging the very way people understand and respond to sexuality’ (Cohen 2001: 200). Yet, Cohen argues that queer politics did not do justice to the promise it gave but rather has ‘served to reinforce simple dichotomies between heterosexual and everything “Queer”’ (Cohen 2001: 200, 201). Queer politics, even though it questioned identity at the very heart of its meaning could not resist becoming an identity category itself. What followed from this is a monolithic understanding of queerness (and I would suggest as lesbian, gay or transgender) but also a monolithic understanding of heterosexuality. By focusing on only one aspect of one’s social existence, in this case sexuality and gender, other characteristics of one’s identity become neglected which leads to a single-oppression framework which constantly misrepresents the distribution of power. And it ignores the ‘multiple and intersecting systems of power that largely dictate our life chances’ (Cohen 2001: 203). Differing relations to power exist not only between queer people but also between so-called heterosexual people. A destabilization and even deconstruction of sexual categories can only work if we do not assume any kind of sexuality as monolithic. The inability of queer politics to successfully challenge binary heteronormativity is based upon the fact that queer politics has too uncritically embraced a simple dichotomy between those deemed queer and those deemed heterosexual.

This ‘being deemed’ is in my eyes the most dangerous notion in relation to politics which engages on the level of sexuality. The static notion which goes hand in hand with ‘being

deemed to be' or 'being something' has in my view the most dangerous aspect in regards to liberatory political agendas. This notion of 'being' somebody relies on narratives of coherence, unity and independence: it supposes that bodies are single, coherent entities which function independently from each other. Our identities are allegedly composed of these hermetically and unifying discourses about the various aspects of our social relations. However, poststructuralist theories on identity and the body have formulated wide critiques of this (Cartesian) conceptualisation. Postanarchist conceptualisations of society also offer resistance on the basis that this notion of 'being' lacks reference to the interconnectedness of human subjects and social relations. However sexuality, identity and the body need to be a stronger target of anarchist re-conceptualization in poststructuralist terms and this is where queer theory could come in. Shane Phelan, lesbian theoretician, drawing on Foucault, has put it like this:

Like its cousin *am* and *is*, the word *be* implies a fixity and stability to lesbian identity that does not serve lesbians. Insofar as we “are” lesbians we are caught up in the network of power centred in the medical/psychological structures that grew up in the nineteenth century around the “types” of character that did certain socially proscribed acts – the homosexual, the pervert, the delinquent, etc. Twist and turn as we might, the imputation of “being” will inevitably implicate us in society’s disciplinary structures. (Phelan 1993: 777)

Transferring Phelan’s thinking to a post-anarchist queer and transgender politics would mean that as one enters public discourse one should not do so as ‘queers’ with a fixed, eternal identity but as those who continue to become queers in the sense of resisting heteronormativity and as people inhabiting temporary (and here is the emphasis) subject positions in a heteronormative society. As Cohen argues, ‘in queer politics sexual expression is something that always entails the possibility of change, movements, redefinition, and subversive performance – from year to year, from partner to partner, from day to day, even from act to act’ (Cohen 2001: 202). So there is a provisional temporary aspect in the political agenda which Phelan advocates for lesbians and I propose for queers and trans*, too. It is the notion of ‘becoming’ which Phelan invokes and which is in line with the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari have contrasted the notion of ‘being’ with the notion of ‘becoming’ which is coherent with the poststructuralist notion of power as fluid and everywhere and in any body. Becoming is always the more accurate term I would

suppose to describe how human beings grow from children into adults into old people, how individuals go from desiring chocolate to desiring cheese or from switching opinions because they read something new and challenging.

Deleuze's and Guattari's thinking is guided by the belief that the autonomous existence of the world does not have to be based on essentialist or rationalist views. The post-anarchist thinker Saul Newman describes Deleuze's theory as rejecting

the unity and essentialism of the subject, seeing it as a structure that constrains desire. He too sees *becoming* – becoming other than Man, other than human – as a force of resistance. He proposes a notion of subjectivity which privileges multiplicity, plurality and difference over unity and flux over the stability and essentialism of identity. (Newman 2001: 159)

Society should be perceived of as multiple systems of oppression which are in operation and these systems use institutionalized categories and identities to regulate and socialize. Cohen suggests 'that it is the multiplicity and interconnectedness of our identities that provide the most promising avenue for the destabilization and radical politicization of these same categories' (Cohen 2001: 221). She envisions 'a politics where one's relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades' (Cohen 2001: 201).

She is talking about a politics where the '*nonnormative* and *marginal* position of punks, bulldaggers and welfare queens, for example is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work' (Cohen 2001: 201). I do agree with Cohen's vision but I think that the basis of common 'experience of oppression' or common relation to power is still too limiting. Instead I would argue for a politics which is based on new coalitions and new practices. These new coalitions, I envision, also include 'associates' and people who see these power relations as oppressing others than themselves and feel the need to end this from the perspective of solidarity and a general opposition to oppression and exclusion. These coalitions would not be based on identity or common experiences but on the concept of 'affinity'. I see this concept, formulated by Donna Haraway, as probably the most important for the queer-transgender-anarchist project. It is a concept of non-identity (and) politics which claims political processes as processes of affinity. Affinity is a relationship based on *choice not of identity*. Affinity is

not about kinship but about desire. ‘Affinity instead of identity’ could be the queer-transgender-anarchist’s processural, temporary, and spatial specific strategy of forming coalitions.

Queer-anarchists would not need a natural matrix of unity and accept that not one construction can hold the whole. This links to the concept of resistance as I have discussed it earlier as well as to the concept of contra-productivity which assumes that practices are always exercising power, also when they are aimed at the hegemonic structure of power relations. Any kind of action derives from the formerly existing framework of power and only works in its boundaries. Theoretical and political actions necessarily have to refer to the discourses they emerge from but there is the possibility to undermine them and contradict them.

Given that power is decentralized and that it works on psychological and semiotic levels, the struggles against heteronormative, discriminating, regulating and exploitative structures should be equally decentralized, local, spontaneous and also humorous, I suppose. Joshua Gamson, in the same vein, depicts anti-organizational cultural activism which uses street-postering, parodic and non-conformist self-presentation, and underground alternative magazines (zines). Cohen is in line with this and states: ‘I mean a politics that does not search for opportunities to integrate into dominant institutions and normative social relationships, but instead pursues a political agenda that seeks to change values, definitions, and laws that make these institutions and relationships oppressive’ (Cohen 2001: 207).

‘The case of queerness’ Joshua Gamson argues ‘calls for a more developed theory of collective identity formation and its relationship to both institutions and meanings, an understanding that *includes the impulse to take apart that identity from within*’ (Gamson 1995: 391). In his terms gay and lesbian social movements have built a collective identity which he calls a quasi-ethnicity, which has its own political and cultural institutions, festivities, neighbourhoods, and even its own flag (Gamson 1995: 391). Steven Seidman has criticised this ethnic/essentialist politics as early as in 1993 (Seidman 1993), but I think that queer theory as we are practicing it now has experienced a backlash which is not helpful for the

original political queer agenda which wants to attack heteronormativity. Gamson asserts that the movement propensity of queer should be 'to blur and deconstruct group categories and to keep them forever unstable' including the group category of heterosexuality (Gamson J. 1995: 393). In Cohen's notion the problem of coalition is not 'what do we share?' but 'What might we share as we develop our identities through the process of coalition? Who might we become?' (Cohen 2001: 779).

I extract from this that coalitions or allies have to *become* just as much as subjectivities. We need to become allies and the question is how can we make allies to become useful for us and from different perspectives. These coalitions that we have to become have to use certain strategies and I believe that these strategies could help to form the agenda and the make-up of the group. Strategies and actions of certain 'radical' groups differ and I believe that these different forms of resistance could help to bring people together who have different subjectivities or different experiences but also different political short-term and even long-term agendas.

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