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Four Models of Anarchist Engagements with Constitutionalism

Benjamin Franks

Abstract

Political anarchism's hostility to constitutional activity has been frequently identified as the core feature distinguishing it from other members of the socialist tradition. Criticisms of state-centred decision-making have been a central feature of anarchism from Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Lucy Parsons and Emma Goldman to the present day. However, there have been minority traditions within anarchism that have engaged in democratic activism. This paper classifies and identifies different forms of anarchist engagements in representative democracy: 1. *Minor Formal Engagement (lesser evil option)* 2. *Horizontal, Structural Reformism*; 3. *Revolutionary (Anti-)Representation* and 4. *Guerrilla Activism*. This taxonomy, also operates, albeit with a few differences with direct democracy operating through state institutions. This paper describes these electoral forms and uses as its sources activist literatures generated by anti-elections campaigns and those who participated in – as anarchists - electoral activism in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, 2015 Spanish local elections, the 2015 UK general election, 2016 US Presidential election, 2016 UK membership of the European Union Referendum and Thirty-sixth Amendment of the Constitution Bill 2018 (Ireland). In developing a taxonomy of anarchist electoral activism the paper draws out differences between the anti-politics of anarchism and those utilised by populist political movements in Europe and North America. It also highlights how different strategies respond to and incorporate standard anarchist critiques of electoralism and state-centred democratic practice. It also argues that participation in referendums (direct democracy) is no less problematic than representative elections, but that some selective engagement can be justified on anarchist grounds.

Key Words: Anarchism, constitutionalism, electoralism, prefiguration, referendum

Introduction

By looking at a group of socially-engaged, but electorally-sceptical political actors, I hope to highlight some criticisms of electoral strategies and referendums, which are anti-authoritarian rather than anti-democratic in character. Anarchist-influenced engagement in representative elections has become increasingly prevalent and subject to examination in recent years (see Condit 2019; Feenstra and Tormey et. al. 2017; Feenstra and Roig 2017; Tormey and Feenstra 2015), although it was not wholly unknown in previous eras (see for instance Cahm 1980, 47-8). In examining anarchist electoral participation, this article distinguishes different forms of electoral participation, which are often dealt with as if they were a single form. By demarcating an anarchist form of electoral criticism it also helps highlight some of the different features of ‘anti-political’ movements, distinguishing a consistent and anti-hierarchical account of ‘anti-politics’ from a more reactionary and *imaginary* one, which took a significant role in the EU Referendum and US Presidential election of 2016. An additional feature of the paper, therefore, is that it also considers anarchist participation in state-based direct democracy as well as in representative elections.

One of the popular defining features of political anarchism¹ has been its rejection of the limitations of the liberal democratic state, its constitutional processes, including participation in elections (Williams 2017). For instance Carl Boggs (1977a and 1977b) demarcates anarchism from social democratic structural reformism and Jacobin state seizure. Before that the distinguished political scientist Richard G. Wilson (1936, 82-3) identified an ‘unblemished anarchism’ which ‘for the most part, supported a complete boycott of the authoritarian political process.’ Anarchists, too, highlight

¹ Here I refer initially to political anarchism to distinguish the use of the term into other disciplines such as *epistemological anarchism*, *ontological anarchism* and *aesthetic anarchism* – though these often have some overlaps with libertarian socialist political movements; however to avoid unnecessary repetition henceforth ‘anarchism’ just refer to the political or anti-political movements and their key thinkers.

their rejection of constitutional action as part of their strategy and political identity (see for instance Bakunin 1953, 217-25, Goldman 1969, Parsons 2004a, 29-31, 38 and 2004b). The division that created one of Britain's first anarchist papers the Yiddish *Der Arbiter Frainit* (later edited by Rudolf Rocker) was over its predecessor, *Der Polische Yidl*'s growing liberalism, highlighted by its support for a parliamentary candidate (Fishman 1975, 151).

It is worth distinguishing the closely related terms *constitutionalism* and *electoralism*. Here, the latter refers to the process of operating in the democratic process (joining or creating parties, drafting manifestos, putting forward candidates for election, electioneering and voting). The former is the adjacent concept of pursuing socio-political or economic change by engaging with or acting in the offices and processes of government. These two are not identical as some groups might take part in competitive elections in order to promote extra-parliamentary activity, but have no intention of engaging in the formal structures of the state: one example of this strategy is *Sinn Fein*'s abstentionist policy with regard to the British parliament in Westminster. Similarly, groups and individuals might reject electoral participation, but use legitimate influence on the offices of state, or accept positions in government. For instance, most non-governmental agencies and pressure groups do not endorse political candidates or instruct citizens on which parties to support but do seek to work within constitutional arrangements to influence governmental policy makers. Nonetheless, for the most part the terms *electoralism* and *constitutionalism* are used largely synonymously.

However anarchism is more than just a minimal rejection of the state and electoral processes. This tactic of abstention is a result of the principles that are embedded in anarchist organisation and tactics. These principles are: *contestation of hierarchical social structures, social view of the self* and *prefiguration*.

The first concept, *anti-hierarchy*, is sometimes broken down into particular oppositions to economic, political and social forms of oppressive power-relationship. In some contexts where economic power is dominant, anti-hierarchy would be expressed in terms of class liberation, where it is racist or patriarchal regulatory power; opposition would be expressed in terms of anti-racism or feminism. Where it is the power of the bureaucratic state, anti-statism becomes the prominent term. However, anarchism also recognises the inter-relation (or intersection) of these forms of power. Oppressions interlock with one another (Lazar 2018). For instance anarchists regard capitalism as exploitative and demeaning, maintaining economic inequalities and requiring coercive institutions, of the state (or state-like institutions) to enforce formally ‘voluntary agreements’ (e.g. Kropotkin, 2013: 39-52; Chomsky, 2005). ‘Anti-hierarchy’, includes notions of liberty, both positive and negative that are more usually found in accounts of anarchism (see Jun 2018; Prichard 2019). It also maps with left-republican notions of ‘anti-domination’, which seeks to develop freedom-enhancing institutions and interpersonal relationships that allow for greatest collective liberty (see Prichard 2019 and Prichard and Kinna 2019).²

The second feature is a *social view of the self*. This views individual identity as fluid but largely constructed by the recognition of others and the social institutions in which one engages. Borrowing from Lacanians and others, the subject is constituted ‘through images and the identifications, real and imagined, that they offer’ (see Roberts 2005: 621). The self is also formed through the material activities a person or group is engaged in. At one point someone is an employee (builder, researcher, sales assistant), in another a practitioner (football player, gardener, cook), and yet another as a family member (parent, sibling, child), with each role prioritising different concepts and communicated internally and externally, through different symbols. No identity or symbolic order takes universal priority. Anarchism thus views individuals as

² Whether freedom should be separated out from anti-hierarchy as a separate core principle is discussed in Franks (2020).

interdependent, and materially-grounded rather than as abstract and independent as in rival ideologies such as classical liberalism or Egoism.

Third, anarchism privileges *prefigurative action*, in which the values embedded in a movement's aims are embodied, as far as possible in their organisational structure and practices. This means that organisations geared towards the contestation of hierarchies of gender, race or class, should themselves be anti-hierarchical (Guillaume in Bakunin, 1984: 7). This places anarchism outside of instrumentalist political traditions like Leninism in which authoritarian methods are justified if they meet libertarian-egalitarian goals (see for instance Lenin 1963, 62-3 and 1975, 37-8).

Methodology

The methods here are largely those associated with political philosophy, namely conceptual clarification and argument analysis (Petit 2000), that are modelled on the natural sciences (McDermott 2008) in its slow accretion of knowledge, though with some revisions. Radical theorists have been critical of the many features of academic research in general (see for instance Ferrell 2009, Firth 2013, Gordon 2006, and Patterson 2015), and political theory including analytical approaches in particular (Franks 2011, Adams and Jun 2015). Some of the criticisms concern the institutional goals, hierarchies and exclusions of academic institutions and the formal and informal networks through which analytical political theory operates (see Gordon 2006, Firth 2013, Ferrell 2009, Le Doeuff 2008). Analytical political philosopher Paul McLaughlin's (2017) response is to make a distinction between the analytical methods on one hand and the intellectual traditions of analytic approaches including its institutionalization. The problem with this approach is that ignores the way institutions influence the focus of research, structure the canon, become the avenues for propagation, shape the audience and affect reception. Institutions thus play a role in de-contesting key concepts, shifting the meaning of terms, and shaping the intuitions by which the plausibility of arguments is often assessed (Goodin 2017, 19).

Methodological criticisms of analytical approaches often cover the lacunae in analytic approaches, where it is accused of failing to recognise the pre-existing social, economic and cultural hierarchies that shape disciplinary behaviours and assumptions and thereby replicate them (Le Doeuff 2008, Franks 2011, Jun 2012). As Michael Freeden (1996, 2005) points out, political philosophy has an inbuilt liberal bias. Like liberalism, analytic philosophy prioritizes rational, value-free thought in order to decontest terms and peacefully resolve conflicts (Freeden, 1996, 37), which Freeden holds is impossible as any meaning-rich proposition helps to construct particular social realities and identities. Political disputes are often based on indeterminacy, inconclusiveness and vagueness, where concepts necessarily have divergent meanings, which no amount of evidence will resolve (Freeden 2005).

Instead the method here uses argument analysis and conceptual clarification, but bears in mind Freeden's conceptual approach that regards political concepts as open to multiple interpretations, gaining their specific meanings through their location next to other concepts. The generation of concepts and their interpretations are shaped in, and through, material practices. The accounts of different movements are based on standard canonical figures of anarchism such as Michael Bakunin, Emma Goldman, Peter Kropotkin and Rudolf Rocker, but also goes beyond a standard canon to include examination of activist literatures found in pamphlets, publically accessible websites and publicity documents (such as stickers, fliers and memes). Similarly, the accounts of non-anarchist movements including populist anti-political movements (this chauvinistic ideology is referred to, here, as *nationalist capitalism*) concentrates on their web-sources and electoral publicity materials. For Freeden (1996, 2003) not only do core concepts mutually define each other, in order to decontest meanings, they also change their position with ideological structures over location and time. For instance, 'anti-democracy' was a core feature of conservatism in the eighteenth century, but in Western countries as democratic institutions helped to stabilise traditional hierarchies, 'anti-democracy' moved to the periphery. Freeden's method is used to question the notion of a fixed

universal minimum, preferring instead a stable constellation of subtly shifting but mutually reinforcing concepts (Franks 2020).

Given the plethora of chauvinistic populist/nationalist capitalist and anarchist sources, the accounts here concentrate, in the cases of the latter, on sources from UK and Republic of Ireland anarchist groups or individuals associated with these movements, as well as interviews from individuals engaged in anarchist constitutionalism (Asher 2015, Bigger 2015, Sharif 2015). Clarifying examples and illustrations are also drawn from other European countries (such as Spain, Greece and Italy) and the United States. In the case of the former – on the formal political groupings around, the then main anti-European Union political party United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (now surpassed by the Brexit Party), Vote Leave and Leave.EU as well as examples drawn from Donald Trump's Presidential election campaign. It does not cover left-populism, as the similarities and differences between left- and right-populism have been covered elsewhere (see for instance Otjes and Louwse, 2015; Akkerman et. al. 2017; Salmela and von Scheve, 2018). The characteristics drawn from chauvinistic populist anti-politics are consistent with these previous studies, and are selected to highlight a particular alternative model of response to the liberal-democratic status quo that contrasts with – but has also borrowed from - anarchism. The use of diverse sources from multiple campaigns demonstrates the continuity and stability of core concepts, though also indicating a degree of flexibility and change consistent with Freedden's method. In some referendums, the framing and wider political context provides greater opportunities for particular types of anarchist intervention and others for right-populist activism. Thus nationalist capitalism was much more at the forefront of the UK membership of the European Union referendum, whilst conversely, this right-populism although not fully absent was much more peripheral in the Scottish Independence referendum. UKIP itself was excluded from the formal British unionist Better Together campaign (Aitken 2013) and operated simply on the side-lines echoing its sentiments (UKIP 2014).

Anarchist Critique of Representative Democracy

The three principles identified in the introduction lie at the heart of anarchist rejections of electoralism and also explain why, on occasions, some forms of constitutional engagement can be consistent with anarchist principles. Four of the anarchists' main criticisms of democratic politics are outlined below. They are:

1. Democracy as hierarchy
2. Location of Power
3. Failures of Electoralism
4. Effectiveness of Prefigurative Practices

1. Democracy as hierarchy

The first is that by electing representatives, the already disadvantaged relinquish their power to the group who are elected to make decisions on their behalf and thus create a political class divide which is incompatible with anti-hierarchical prefigurative practice (Bakunin 1984, 36; Ward 1984). This anti-representationalism has been and remains a core feature of anarchism (May 1994, 49-50; see too Parsons 2004b, 95-6), and takes two inter-related forms. The first, covered in this subsection, is that voting representative democracy involves the masses giving up their power to an elected few who make decisions on their behalf. The second, covered more in *failures of electoralism* (below) is that representationalism leads to deficiencies as the desires of diverse, changing groups cannot be adequately administered by others.

Liberal democracy is predicated on the supremacy of a single political agent: that of the enfranchised national citizen. In Aristotle's account of politics, the *demos* is the unification of people into a single unit (the state). The masses become the *demos* through their incorporation into a single structure. A different account of *demos* is that they are the common mass of the people with all their numerous, fluid interests and multiple identities, without a unifying structure (they are plural: *demoi*).

The *demoi* are those who can and do co-ordinate themselves with adaptable, inclusive decision-making and facilitating structures with none being universally applicable. Graeber is in agreement, however, he has a preference for consensus (Graeber 2014, esp. 192-96 and 210-42). No single method universally unifies the *demoi*, though disparate identities can be brought together on the basis of mutuality and solidarity. There will always be a surplus – some desire or interest that is unrepresented – due to the malleability of identities over time and place, that exceeds any fixed political arrangement whether it is representative democracy, direct democracy or consensus.

Demoi shares much in common with Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's (2000, 60-64) concept of the *multitude*, which covers those not subject to sovereign control, but who act and express themselves in new forms of political organisation. However, the emphasis here is on the practices, organisational structures, concepts and arguments which produce and are produced by the *demoi* rather than their identities themselves. For anarchists, different anti-hierarchical practices require different organisational practices to ensure the minimisation of hierarchy. Only on rare occasions is mass, representative democracy the preferred, provisional option (see McKay 2012, 1036-54).

2. Location of power

Concentrating on the operations of the democratic structures of the state misses where power actually operates and thus facilitates continued oppression. Liberal democratic theory considers the state to be the final arbiter, whilst anarchists take a different view. Some syndicalists – following orthodox Marxists (Marx, 1981, 20-2) – argue that there is a single location of power that determines the political: namely the economy. Other anarchists regard oppressions to be intersectional, having no single origin or cause. Concentrating on political power therefore reduces political subjects down to the *demos*, but this leaves other sites – and often much more dominant ones – undisturbed. As Goldman (1969, 201-03) notes, providing equal political rights leaves economic and cultural inequalities unaffected. With the multiplicity of sites of power, radicals taking over democratic government either have to continue to meet the interests of powerful, hierarchical political blocs as well as their military and business communities, as the Greek SYRIZA-led government found. If they do not conform, argues Class War (1992, 47) they are overthrown like Allende in Chile or, they alleged, subject to secret state machinations, such as those against Harold Wilson.

3. Failures of electoralism

In a reversal of the usual portrayal of revolutionary transformation as ‘impossibilist’ over the ‘possibilism’ and pragmatism of social democratic gradual reform (Coleman, 1987), anarchists argue that it is utopian to expect hierarchical and oppressive institutions to bring about egalitarian, libertarian transformation. John Holloway (2002, 12), in a brief survey of state seizures and social democratic governments concludes that their record is no different from pro-capitalist governments, to such an extent that ‘most social democratic parties have long since abandoned any pretension to be the bearers of radical reform’. Rocker (nd, 43-44, 65-86; see too Bakunin 1984, 34) highlights a problem with any form of representative structure: it provides a layer of management who take decisions on behalf of others. As a result, the autonomy of groups and individuals to self-organise is

undermined. By giving up power to a bureaucratic group erodes the workforce's ability to collectively develop the skills and knowledge for self-management. Whichever group is chosen as the 'representative', because of their separate location they have interests that differ from those they represent (Bakunin 1984, 36) and to remain power they require to satisfy the interests of other hierarchs (Parsons 2004b, 97). Thus representationalism generates a group who cannot but make failed decisions, and undermine the ability of the oppressed to achieve autonomy.

4. Effectiveness of prefigurative practices

The flipside to the condemnation of representative, constitutional methods' poor track record in achieving emancipatory, anti-capitalist social relations is the evocation of the benefits of prefigurative approaches. Prefigurative methods critique the instrumentalism of electoralism and state seizure which justify deception and the (re-)creation of managerialist hierarchies. Instead prefigurative methods, rather than having epistemologically questionable success criteria (vote maximisation, increased party membership) instead prioritise the generation of exciting, life-enhancing relationships in the here-and-now that foreshadow wider social ambitions. Whether or not prefigurative methods ultimately produce the revolution they seek is less important (and in a sense unknowable, given the limitations of futurology) than avoiding reproducing oppressive social relationships and corrupt institutions.

In short, abstentionist methods are most consistent with anarchist principles. Democracy perpetuates social hierarchies between rulers and the electorate, seeking to protect and enhance institutions based on economic and other inequalities, with which the state intersects. Prefigurative practices are preferable, developing in the here and now the types of social relationship, which at least in part, foreshadow desired emancipatory social relations.

Anti-Politics in Summary: Anarchist versus nationalist capitalism

There has been much debate in the last decade about the rise of anti-political movements, with many political commentators debating a crisis in democracy, a concern that reached a crescendo with the 2016 EU referendum decision and the election of Donald Trump (see for instance Giroux and Bhattacharya 2016; Richards 2017; Wood 2017). Matt Wood, co-convenor of the PSA's specialist group on anti-politics, associates the term with anti-establishment sentiments arising out of a particular economic setting of growing precariousness developed from neoliberal globalization. Anti-politics is often associated with right-wing populism but forms exist that reject racist and nationalist sentiment. Anti-Politics, for Wood is an emergent concept, 'something we don't yet know in full, and something that could be beneficial to either left or right. It's a concept that captures this feeling [that] we have a *vacuum* in public life.'

Other theorist such as Luke March (2017) have incisively tracked the differences between left and right populism. In March's case he concentrates on UKIP plus the BNP to represent the latter, whilst his contrast is with radical social democrats (RESPECT and the Scottish Socialist Party). So ideological distinct are these forms of populism, that it can be misleading to use the same term to discuss them. Thus, I prefer 'nationalist capitalism' to identify right-populism. The term identifies the chauvinistic features of the ideology, distinguishing it from neoliberalism, and is consistent with key movement thinker's self-description. Steve Bannon for instance refers to himself as an 'economic nationalist', the replacement of the first term with 'capitalist' more precisely identifies which form of political economy he prefers (see Bradner 2016).

This study, by contrast shows a clear distinction between anarchist anti-politics and the populist anti-politics of UKIP and Trump (and latterly the Brexit Party). Anarchists reject national and super-national representative political structures, which they argue, is largely there to stabilise and normalise deeply hierarchical economic and social power. In its place anarchist populism seeks

diverse responses to the multiplicity of irreducible but intersecting oppressions of everyday life. The concept of *micropolitics* tends to capture their focus: examining and changing everyday practices that embody particular types of value and social relationship. ‘Most anarchists set their revolutionary sights not only on the macro-level institutions that re-inscribe domination in all its forms, but also on the more micro-level sites where ideologies of domination actually materialize in the immediate experiences of individuals’ (Portwood-Stacer 2018, 130). By concentrating on the micro- with an eye on the macro-, the macropolitical is transformed.

Trump and British right-populist parties, like UKIP, appear to share similar anarchist anti-political concerns with the established political class, the social hierarchy it produces and the way they entrench economic inequality. The infamous Vote Leave bus advertisement’s apparent commitment to reallocate UK’s EU budget contribution to the welfare state, and in particular socialised medicine, indicated their commitment to the economically marginalised (See Leave.EU 2016). But as Giroux and Bhattacharya (2016) indicate, the anti-politics of UKIP and Trump was largely one of ‘rhetoric’. Trump’s professed hatred of the political class and its corrupt symbiotic relationship with high finance (‘the swamp’ that needed to be drained) did not prevent him running through one of the two established parties, with the support of career politicians and appointing members of Morgan Stanley to his own administration. The rhetoric might be radical on occasion (Trump 2016, 12:50-13:00), unusually for an American politician running through one of the two main parties, acknowledges the existence of – and claimed to campaign for – ‘the working class’ (rather than the more usual label ‘middle-class’) but national capitalism’s anti-politics protects existing economic and social inequalities tending to stabilise traditional economic relationships and institutions. The few protections for the environment, welfare provision or workers’ rights are abandoned; even the redistributive pledge that was plastered on Vote Leave bus was dropped the day after the referendum. The images used to generate political subjects and the way they are referred to and positioned unify the *demos* into a tighter more disciplined agent operating through the leadership of

the revitalised nation-state.³ The working class in Trump’s speeches are specifically American, especially patriotic Americans, rather than international,⁴ exploited not by employers but migrants. By contrast, the images used by anarchist anti-politics attempts to break the unifying structure, finding stable, but provisional, solidarities that respect and enhance multiple, fluid anti-hierarchical identities.

Whilst some radicals, like the influential libertarian socialist Maurice Brinton (2004, 178), have hoped that right-populist anti-politics might transform into anarchist anti-politics, this rarely happens. The political institutions, goals, norms, tactics and images of populist anti-politics are so distinct that the apparent similarities are illusory. So whilst accepting Wood’s contention that ‘anti-politics’ is still emergent and its meanings change depending on historical and social context a few distinctions between the populist strand and the anarchist one can be identified (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Differences between Anarchist and Nationalist Capitalist Anti-Politics

	Anarchist Anti-Politics	Nationalist Capitalist Anti-Politics
<i>Institutions</i>	Comprehensive rejection of representative system: abolition of parliamentary state	Partial rejection – abolition of some governmental structures but reform and extension of state structures
	Prioritises multiple, anti-hierarchical forms of political organisation and decision making	Political legitimacy based on electoral success and primarily operates through a formal political party
<i>Goals and norms</i>	Eradication of separate political class (no replacement with better representatives)	Reform of political class with ‘good people’ (supporters) taking lead positions
	Operates with - and alongside - opposition to capitalism and economic inequality	Largely protects private property relations. Access to markets becomes a rentable asset rather than universal right or goal

³ ‘EU membership stops us controlling who comes into our country, on what terms, and who can be removed. The system is out of control... The only way to take control is to Vote Leave.’ (Vote Leave 2016a).

⁴ A similar reformulation of class is found in UK populism See David Winder ‘There’s a war on for your mind’, *UKIP Daily* 12 June 2017 <http://www.ukipdaily.com/theres-war-mind>.

	Intersects with challenges to other forms of oppression (based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, (dis-)ability)	Ignores or exacerbates forms of discrimination and oppression
<i>Agency</i>	Multiple political identities (<i>demoi</i>)	Sovereignty of the reformed national citizen (<i>demos</i>)
<i>Tactics</i>	Promotes prefigurative, diverse alternative tactics outside of and against the state	Privileges electoralism, alternative methods are legitimised by and support constitutional action
<i>Images and discourse</i>	Anti-nationalistic, egalitarian, satirical against opponents and self	Nationalistic, discriminatory, satirical against opponents but no self-deprecation

Anarchist anti-politics is more than just rhetorical swipes at the ‘establishment’ and the attempt to replace one group of politicians and political parties with another, but involves a systematic rejection and transformation of the norms and structures of civil society. Part of this has involved the explicit rejection of electoralism and pursuing political change through constitutional action. Anarchists have run for instance, anti-election campaigns such as the *Anti-Elections Alliance* and *Angry Not Apathetic*. These campaigns involve highlighting the perceived inadequacies of the representative democratic framework, but also indicating the possibility of alternative forms of anti-hierarchical political engagement. However, there have been instances of anarchist anti-politics taking the form of electoral activity.

The unusualness of the anarchist anti-political perspective becomes apparent when it is compared with the anti-politics of nationalist capitalism. The former’s dissatisfaction with the cultural milieu it operates within and its inability to address certain contemporary problems with its standard repertoire of tactics drives it to adopt electoralism as an unorthodox experimental position. By contrast nationalist capitalist anti-politics regards electoral politics as the norm and adopts some of the tropes of more radical anti-politics in order to protect the representative state. Thus Bone (2015, 24) recommends Class War’s electoral adventure to an anarchist audience in *Strike* magazine because of the lack of success of abstention campaigns. Similarly Ramon Feenstra, Vicente Roig et. al (2017) report that many anarchists involved in the 15M movement in Castellon engaged with

electoralism because, as one of their respondents explained: ‘We have been carrying the anarchist flag for decades, but it does not work for me. So some of us have decided to explore other forms of political experimentation, like institutional politics.’

Anarchist engagements in electoralism

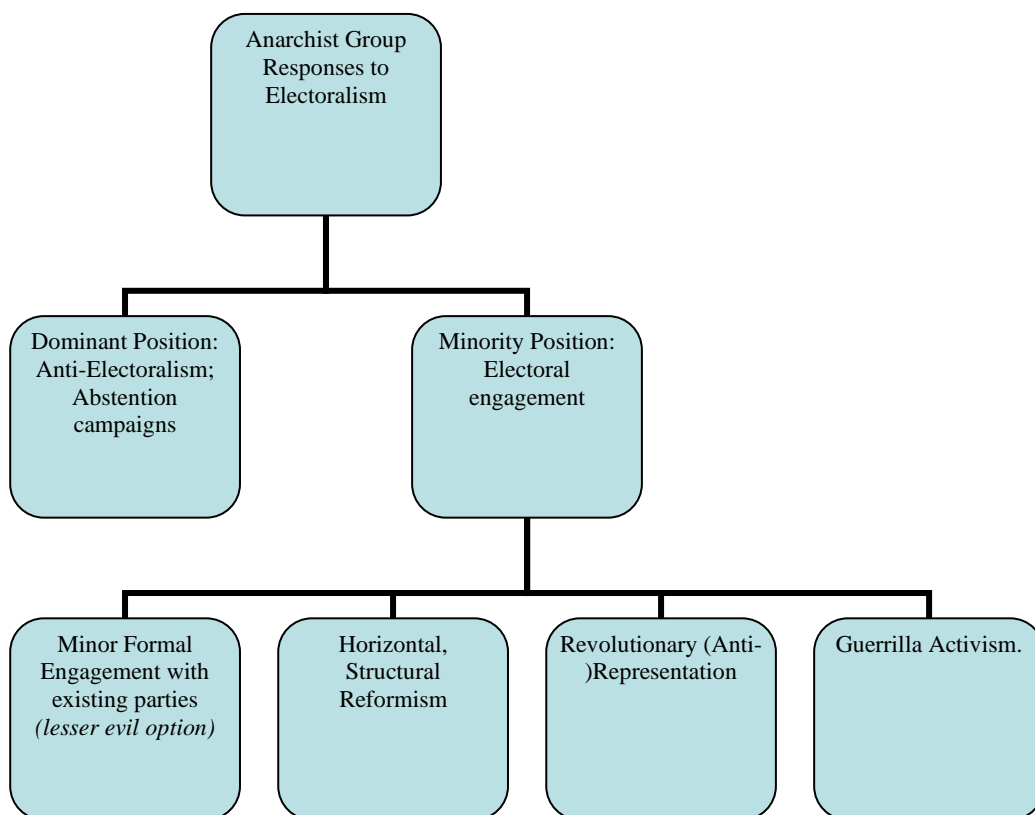
Despite the frequent identification of anarchism with anti-electoralism, there has nonetheless, been a significant number of anarchist engagements in electoral activity. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, widely regarded as the father of modern anarchism, was an elected member of the French Assembly. As the anarchist historian Max Nettlau notes there was a small historic stream of anarchist electoralism around Paul Brousse and his followers (Broussists) (see Nettlau 1996, 128). More recently the anarchic counter-culture *Kaboteurs* in the late 1960s and early 1970s stood and gained representation on Amsterdam’s local council. In 1979 Jello Biafra⁵ the anarchic lead singer of the Dead Kennedys stood for election for Mayor of San Francisco (Bogad 2005). In the 1970s Israeli anti-authoritarian communists joined with non-Communist Party (CP) leftist radicals to stand candidates to propagandise, but also to raise the issue of releasing activist Rami Livne, who had been imprisoned for ‘meeting with a Palestinian from the occupied territory’ (Shalif 2015).

In the UK too, anarchist groups have flirted with constitutional activism: In 1969 the anarchist Ian Bone stood in Swansea council elections, where he reportedly got 10 votes. Bone was joined in the 1979 Swansea Council elections by his colleagues from the anarchist influenced *Alarm*. In 1988 Class War stood a candidate (John Duignan) in the Kensington by-election gaining just 60 votes. In May 2003, the Bristolian Party, heavily influenced by anarchists, stood 12 candidates in the local council elections, receiving on average about 8% of the vote in the wards they stood in.

⁵ Biafra has taken a range of positions, including being a supporter of the Green Party. During the heyday of the Dead Kennedys he saw himself as part of the larger anarchist current (see the documentary *Anarchism in America* (1983)).

In 2015 a resurrected Class War announced it was standing candidates in the May 2015 general election. Candidates included Jon Bigger, Alan Louttit, Adam Clifford, and Lisa McKenzie.

Figure 2. Anarchism Response to Representative Elections



Among the minority electoralist (and constitutionalist) positions, there are four categories of participation (figure 2). These are represented in discrete boxes, but instead they should be thought of as tendencies, with some groups or actions, taking one position then occasionally merging into another. Taking them in order of the least to the most *demos*-cratic and prefigurative there is first:

Minor formal engagement (lesser evil option)

This tactic proposes participation at the most minimal level of electoral engagement. It suggests that in majoritarian electoral systems, with each electoral district or constituencies returning a single

representative, anarchist activists cast a vote for the least worst of the representative candidates likely to win the election as a form of damage limitation. It is called here ‘minor formal engagement’ but is usually referred to as the ‘lesser evil’ option, which is how advocates like John Halle and Noam Chomsky (2016) refer to it in their advocacy. Chomsky (2008) with Halle (Chomsky and Halle 2016) point to the progressive outcomes for disadvantaged groups if more social democratic rather than (neo-)conservative and (neo-)liberal candidates gain electoral position and the negative impacts of the alternative. Examples include anarchists supporting the presidential candidacy of democratic socialists like Bernie Sanders in the United States or Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom against more centrist and compromised candidates. Chomsky stresses the point that endorsing the lesser of two evils does not undermine direct action alternatives. Instead these minor formal engagements can be used, he argues, to highlight to others how undesirable the choice one is selecting is, and reveal the underlying factors that produce two realistic, but deeply flawed choices.

Chomsky’s proposal, despite a number of anarchist critics suggesting otherwise (see for instance Black 2014), is not wholly inconsistent with anarchism. As Freeden’s analysis suggests the principles of anti-statism is a feature of a more general critique of anti-hierarchy and operates alongside a social view of the self and prefiguration. On occasion, state action, in the absence of imminent social alternatives, can be preferable to grosser forms of economic hierarchy, such as those of unregulated capitalism or fascist totalitarianism.

Brian Williams (2017) argues, along with many abstentionists, that any engagement with the contemporary state is inconsistent with anarchism.⁶ This is largely due to accounts of ‘anarchism’ being identified with a universal minimum of ‘anti-statism’ rather than the constellation of core mutually reinforcing, but evolving concepts identified at the start. If anarchism is defined in terms

⁶ Williams (2017) argues that an egalitarian democratic transitional state could potentially be used as an instrument for anarchist progress in a post-revolution, post-ruling class setting.

of a universal minimum of ‘anti-statism’ it would be inconsistent to engage with the state. However, ideologies in general, and anarchisms in particular, are evolving structures of mutually defining but not universal concepts. Anti-statism is only one part of the broader notion of *anti-hierarchy* and a *social view of the self*. Limited engagement in the state might foreshadow anti-hierarchical social relations, if the only viable alternative to statist action was passive acquiescence to even grosser inequalities of power. What is being prefigured is not the state but action to limit hierarchy and protect and enhance autonomous social practice from authoritarian interference. This is not to deny the repressive character of the social democratic or liberal state (Williams 2017, 21-2), but to recognise, as Bakunin (1984, 36) notes that it is a ‘thousand times better’ than tyranny.

Nor is Chomsky alone in adopting this strategy. It is an open, if dirty secret in anarchist circles, that core critics of social democratic parties in particular, and representative politics in general, have nonetheless voted for candidates of the parliamentary left. This is a tactic that gains increasing legitimacy in anarchist circles if the vote is part of a drive against a candidate from an overtly fascist party (see discussion on Libcom 2017).

There are a number of reasons why *minor formal engagement* is not an overt part of the anarchist toolbox of tactics. The most prominent is that there is the risk of the slippery slope, as there seems to be no clear point of demarcation between voting for a candidate and giving wider support for a nominee, such as persuading others to vote for them, fund-raising, joining the electoral campaign and taking resources from more consistently anti-hierarchical social practices. Any electoral participation is seen as a gateway to embracing representative democracy.

One clear principle which might prevent the slide down the slope is when voting does not prevent participation in extra-parliamentary direct action. Chomsky (2016) is clear in his support for lesser evil electoral action that whilst the outcome of elections can have a more or less maleficent impact on populations, it cannot make the radical change necessary for liberation and thus these electoral

tactics should not replace alternative anarchist methods. Similarly, by limiting participation to the privacy of the ballot booth or calls to support a candidate in the immediate run-up to an election, along with criticisms of the representative method, then Chomsky suggests there is a significant stop on the slippery slope.

Nonetheless secretive casting of ballots, without the more public endorsement, does have inconsistencies with anarchist anti-politics. As it remains furtive, its anarchist critics argue, it is incompatible with the values of accessibility and openness that are formal features of anarchist organisation and tactics. Anarchist critics maintain that where *formal engagement* is overt it reproduces electoral logics and does little to subvert them. It involves giving actual support to a hierarchy of politicians and corrupting institutions, and encourages the democratic strategy of ‘progressive parties’ making opposing parties as anti-social and threatening as possible in order to mobilise support for the *lesser evil*. This was a strategy that Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign apparently endorsed, as it encouraged media outlets to provide greater coverage to initially marginal Republican candidates, like Trump, with disastrous consequences (DeBenedetti 2016).

Horizontal Structural reformism

This electoral method takes its name from Carl Boggs’s (1977b) tripartite division of radical socialist action. Boggs discusses state seizure, which he calls *Jacobinism* associated with Leninism, *prefiguration* (by which Boggs means anarchism and left-communism) and *structural reformism* which is his term for varieties of social democracy. ‘Horizontal’ is added to demarcate it from standard social democracy as the new forms come, the new radical political movements in Greece and especially Spain that have their origins in anarchist anti-political protests and have a prior commitment to anti-hierarchical or horizontal forms (Bray 2018, Tormey and Feenstra 2015). In Spain these local groups include *Castelló en Moviment* (Castellon in Movement), *Barcelona en*

Comú, Ahora Madrid, Zaragoza en Común and nationally *Podemos*. Their explicit goals are still consistent with anarchism: the transformation of the economy and social relations and replacement of the hierarchy of representative government with accessible and participatory decision making (see for instance Tormey and Feenstra 2015; Condit 2019?). However, these radical transformations are to be achieved through the constitutional apparatus.

There are a number of problems with structural reformism. In most cases it is nothing new, despite the discourse of ‘experiments in electoralism’ and ‘new opportunities’ (Feenstra and Roig et. al 2017). The political structure of these horizontal parties prefigures the more egalitarian social relationships they hope to produce. These include ultimate decision-making relying on assembly of participants, salary caps, limits on terms of office and revocation mechanisms to prevent or limit leadership hierarchies and rejection of corporate funding to ensure the party is not dependent on wealthy backers (Feenstra and Roig et. al. 2017). However, the history of many social democratic parties lies in similar ambitions for widespread social transformation through electoral participation and responsive, prefigurative party structures. Similarly as Mark Bray (2018) a political organiser and theorist of Occupy points out, analogous norms and values were part of the early Ecology and Green Parties, which also contained considerable numbers of social libertarians. However, the anti-hierarchical organising principles led to a conflict between the *Fundi*’s who wished to maintain prefigurative, egalitarian structures and the *Realos* who sought to replace them in order to make the Party a more professional electoral organisation.

Despite the commitments to rejecting hierarchies, structural reformists tend to reproduce them, and in order to stay in power develop relationships with the security apparatus and more orthodox economic and cultural institutions. The norms of groups like *Podemos* and other post 15M Spanish local electoral initiatives begin to change with initially *anarchist values* of solidarity, prefiguration self-management and mutual aid transforming into ones based on electoral legitimacy, efficient policy-making and effective reform.

Revolutionary (Anti-)Representation

The term revolutionary (anti-)representation plays on the notion of revolutionary representatives from Lenin (1975, 52) who regards participation in parliament to be necessary, in the pre-revolutionary period, to raise class consciousness, but who unlike Lenin refuse to taking part in executive or legislative action. By engaging in elections, the group uses the freedoms of parliamentary democracy to highlight the demeaning, hierarchical features of the capitalist state and to use the legitimacy of elected position to promote socialist causes. It also provides a method for testing the broader reception of revolutionary ideas, and the elected candidate has a degree of legitimacy for their views. It is a tactic largely associated, perhaps not altogether accurately, with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht and some of ‘infantile left’ attacked by Lenin (1975).

The main weaknesses of this tactic are that it is still predicated on a hierarchical relationship between the elected (or nominated) leadership and the rest of the ‘represented’ electorate. The candidates are selected on the basis of their ability to persuade the rest of the case for socialism, which assumes an objective, possibilist account of ‘socialism’, as opposed to the one which arises from the multiple perspectives and interactions of the oppressed themselves. Thus, there is a tension between the *demos*, the unified voice represented into the representative (as candidate or parliamentarian) and the diverse interests of the *demoi* or multitude.

The tactic also requires candidates, especially those elected to play by the constitutional rules. To speak in the UK Parliament, for instance, requires oaths of allegiance and obedience to the conservative procedures of the legislature. Such a performance of loyalty appears to contradict the ethos of rebellion against institutions of domination with its corresponding preference for extra-parliamentary direct action. However, some who adopt this tactic, like Sinn Fein in the UK

Parliament, use the legitimacy and material resources of elected office to critique the British state and partitions, but do not enter the legislature, as to do so they would need to affirm loyalty to the British Crown.

A further problem is that those who use revolutionary anti-representationalism are pressured to take electoral positions and use influence in parliament. Whether it is to vote against war credits (Leibknecht 1914) or to join a coalition to prevent the formation of an especially reactionary government, pressure mounts on revolutionary representatives to use constitutional processes and thus affirm the social relationships that underpin them. If they do so, then they become little more than social democrats, if they fail to do so, they appear to be responsible for a policy they could have stopped. The Dutch Kaboteurs provide an example of a group that initially began with a strategy based on revolutionary (anti-)representation, but as they became electorally successful they became increasingly structural reformists (Bogad 2005).

Guerrilla Activism

Guerrilla activism is the most consistently anarchistic of the engagements in constitutionalism, as it involves engaging in electoral processes but without participating in the institutions of representative state power or seeking to make reforms. Although this method too is not without its problems. It takes its name from L. M. Bogad's distinction between performative, guerrilla interventions that as part of a wider ideological critique expose socio-economic relationships of power contrasted with the softer satire of groups like the Monster Raving Loony Party of Great Britain (MRLP) and the Rhinoceros Party of Canada, which humorously 'sends-up [...] the political system that just about anyone can laugh at without feeling insulted' (Bogad, 2005, 31-2). Like revolutionary (anti-)representationalism guerrilla activism involves standing candidates in order to highlight the radical critique of the state in general and the democratic state in particular. *Class*

War's 2015 general election campaign provides a good example. The candidates used the opportunities presented by the election and the exposure they received (in local and national newspapers, radio and television including candidate Adam Clifford's appearance on *The Daily Politics Show*)⁷ to draw attention to the inherent power structures of representative democracy. They used the platform to make many of the key anarchist critiques of representative democracy, including the promotion of anti-hierarchical, extra-parliamentary action.

Unlike revolutionary (anti-)representation, however, the tactic does not aim to get people elected. This method avoids accusation of supporting the legitimacy of electoral methods, by first including criticisms of representative politics and second by making it overt that they are uninterested whether they garner any votes, but that action it is outside of parliament that matters (see Bone 2015, Ross 2015). As such it does not present the candidate as a mouthpiece for representation but prioritises the actions of the *demos* outside of the unifying state.

There are however, a number of problems. First, some of *Class War's* candidates did appear to be offering policy solutions (mansion tax, duty free beer, doubling social security benefits), which suggested a return to social democracy. *Class War* candidates themselves, such as Bigger (2015), suggest these were only offered up as part of the satirical features of the campaign and as a way of opening up a dialogue with voters. Secondly as anarchist critics pointed to stand seven candidates meant that *Class War* had to pay the state £3500 in deposits (their vote was too small to get them back). This money could have been used for direct action campaigns (Dickens 2015). Bone (2015) retorted that if there was meaningful extra-parliamentary action going on, then this is a fair enough, but there was no such alternatives, and this was a way of publicising and enhancing what little was going on, like squatting and campaigns against Poor Door (separate, inferior entrances for social housing tenants in mixed housing units).

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_5WpUL0WXo

More significantly, anti-elections advocate Floaker (2015) argues that standing candidates damages the possibility for direct action – as it appears to support constitutional engagement. Whilst Floaker accepts that guerrilla activism is deliberately mocking the elections, Floaker’s concern is that not everyone will see it as satire. There are good reasons to support Floaker’s contention, and some of the candidates could have made their satirical position clearer, however as Freedon’s conceptual analysis suggests, multiple interpretations are always likely especially around essentially contested terms like ‘democracy’.

Phil Dickens (2015) also suggests that guerrilla activism itself is hierarchical, even if the aim is not to win electoral position, as attention is centred on the individual candidates, which restricts the role of others to ‘voters’, and it could be added one structured around being national subjects (the *demos*). Again the hierarchies of guerrilla action are unavoidable, and not entirely absent from direct action, either, but they are much more provisional and limited than under revolutionary (anti-)representationalism or horizontal, structural reformism and by circulating candidates the production of a stable cadre is constrained. Anarchist abstentionists fear a slippery slope where guerrilla activism becomes revolutionary (anti-)representationalism and then horizontal structural reformism until it becomes no different from the increasingly neo-liberal institutions of social democracy.

Anarchism and referendums

Referendums highlight a particular set of positions for anti-state actors. There are multiple responses. Stylistically, and in order to present a neater heuristic, these can be represented using the same four category taxonomy as that used in representative politics. However, the fit is not neat because of the lack of a mediating group (representatives) in direct democracy, there is no possibility of revolutionary (anti-)representation in the same way associated with Liebknecht or practised by Sinn Fein. As explained below this category operates slightly differently, with the

promotion of the referendum question itself rather than intending it to have legislative force that demarcates it from structural reformism. Similarly the ways in which guerrilla activism manifests itself is different than under representative politics.

With referendums the standard anarchist position is anti-electoralism, as represented by the abstentionist AEA and ANA. This position rejects participation on the standard anarchist grounds, as the production and maintenance of a political class does not disappear under the direct democracy of a referendum. For abstentionist groups, referendums arise out the legislature, usually to resolve a problem faced by a split political class. Referendums are based on the single identity of the *demos*, with the *demoi* instructed to make a decision as if they were the state itself in making the choice. A fiction, as the masses are not, and cannot be, the state.

For the anti-electoral position, the referendum is a way of resolving fissures within the political class to maintain the structure of representative democracy. Referendum choice invariably arise out of a predetermined set of options that limit the electorate's diverse interests to a few discrete choices. Even citizens' initiatives, referendums that originate in enough voters signing a call for a vote (see the distinction made by Mendez et. al. 2014, 15), such as in California or Switzerland, are utilised by political parties or powerful institutions to serve wider legislative programmes. They are also used to integrate potentially disruptive groups into the representative system of the nation state (see Treschel and Krisei, 1996, 191-92).⁸ As John Annette (2010) reports, referendums, consultative activities and other deliberative forms of direct participation, gain significant policy support across the political system because they maintain existing political, economic and social hierarchies not because they threaten them. The advocacy of direct elections was proposed by these institutions in an attempt to re-engage the disenchanting *demos* and reaffirm the structures of the democratic state not to replace them. Stephen Tierney (2012) argues that engagement in

⁸ Pier Uleri (1996) provides a more detailed typology of referendum on such things as the originator of the vote and whether it is legally obligated (such as amending the Constitution) whether the voters decision is binding or advisory and to whom it applies.

referendums can lead to the development of the republican citizen over and above the more limited character of the liberal subject. Nonetheless, the referendum is based on the sovereignty of the unified political subject secured by the nation state.⁹

Whilst most anarchists therefore utilise standard anti-electoralism, there are numerous instances of selective engagement in referendum. For some anarchists, like Andrew Flood (2016a) of the Republic of Ireland-based Workers' Solidarity Movement (WSM), referendums can be preferable to representative elections as 'referendums may allow the people to directly make a decision, if only at the level of selection between the choices offered.' It provides an opportunity to diminish the political hierarchies of the represented-representative. The WSM has been active in supporting particular sides of Irish referendums, including more recently, overturning the constitutional ban on abortion-rights (WSM 2018). However as Flood (2016a) goes on to explain more often than not there is no real choice over how public decisions are interpreted by the state. Whilst the *demos* are asked to assume the position of the state, as they are and cannot be the state, the results are enacted by those institutions themselves and secure the best interests of the dominant classes.

Collectively, countries within the European Union (EU) have had from 1982-2012 21 membership referendums 16 treaty ratification referendums and 10 policy referendums on EU-related issues alone (Mendez et al. 2014, 24-5). Whilst Britain unlike its neighbours in the Irish republic and France did not have ratification referendums, it did begin to adopt more domestic policy-related referendums following the election of Tony Blair: With plebiscites in Wales and Scotland in 1997 and local votes on restructuring English local government.

⁹ According to Tierney (2012, 15), 'In turn, individuals come reflexively to identify with one another through their shared commitment to this constitution. It is, therefore, also in this context of the polity-building or nation-building potential of constitutional lawmaking that we must address constitutional referendums. When referendums are used to make or recreate constitutions they can themselves take on a vital nation-building role. In light of these high stakes, from a civic republican perspective there again appears to be a strong prima facie case for direct popular engagement.'

Where there is anarchist engagement in state-centred direct democracy, it is selective. The 2011 referendum on electoral reform provided no significant issue for anarchists and indeed barely figured in the public imagination at the time, where it was largely used to kick the Liberal Democrats, a coalition partner with the Conservatives, who proposed the referendum and would have been the primary beneficiary had it been passed. However, the 2014 referendum on Scottish Independence and the 2016 referendum on leaving the EU, did elicit considerable commentary, both these elections elicited high electoral turnout (85% compared to 60-70% for parliamentary elections and 30-35% for European parliamentary elections). With such intense interest, non-engagement meant missing out on the conversation and seeming to be irrelevant. However given the binary nature of the referendum questions – Scottish Independence (IndyRef) or remaining part of the UK, leaving or remaining in the EU – there seemed little possibility for the satirical interventions that seek to highlight the repressive institutions that lie behind such decision-making. However, I discuss below some examples of the minority anarchist position as they apply to direct democracy.

Scottish Independence 2014 (IndyRef)

In 2014 IndyRef there were 3 main positions:

1. Abstention
2. No (remain in Union)
3. Yes (Scottish Independence)

The standard abstentionist position, was adopted by many formal anarchist groups, such as the Anarchist Federation. As they are against all nation states whether large or small, Scottish social-democratic or British neo-liberal, they argued for abstaining from voting, using the campaign to

highlight the oppressive features of all nationalism and the development of *demoi-cratic* alternatives. 'Simply put, there is no reason to believe that in an independent Scotland libertarian socialist organising would be in real terms any easier or that because of its existence we would see an upsurge in class struggle' (Member of Glasgow Anarchist Federation 2012). The critiques offered were consistent with the standard anarchist arguments against electoralism.

The second position was adopted by numerically the fewest anarchists (though it did include a former editor of *Class War*). They argued against independence because it would make co-operation between different nations of the British Isles more difficult, highlighted fears of different states in the island being played off each other by multinational corporations and a hostility to a revitalised Scottish nationalism (whilst ignoring that the No camp was based on a 'British nationalism'). It made fewest references to the anarchist critique of representative democracy. The third position (in favour of Scottish Independence) was the most lively and complex of the three positions and contained the most variants: *structural reformism*, *informal participation* and *Guerrilla participation*, which are outlined below.

Membership of European Union 2016 (Brexit)

The European Union referendum (Brexit) took place in a far different context to the IndyRef. The Prime movers for Scottish Independence were largely social democratic forces: SNP, Scottish Greens and Scottish Socialists. Anarchists who participated in these campaigns found shared concerns with other members of the Yes camp and had a realistic expectation that they could find potential sympathy, in some quarters, for extra-parliamentary prefigurative action. The motivation for Brexit however was a deep and abiding schism within the Conservative Party, with two rival capitalist agendas with both sides varying between neo-liberalism and nationalist capitalism (though the former slightly more prominent in the Remain side and the latter more pronounced on the Brexit

side). The terms of reference for the debate rarely waived from a xenophobic concern with ‘control of borders’, protection of trade and maintenance of the security structures of the liberal state often expressed using racist tropes (see for instance Vote Leave 2016b; Gilligan 2018). Each side promising they were in the best position to repel strangers, support the interests of business and enact surveillance of its population.

Although radical social democrats and Leninists can be found on both sides of the debate: George Galloway, Penny Cole (2016) and Neil Davidson (2016) supporting *Brexit*; Jeremy Corbyn, Patrick Harvie, Alan Armstrong (2016) supporting *Remain*, there seemed little room for anarchist, guerrilla, engagements with either side either as a ‘yes but...’ or ‘no but...’. Unlike the 2014 IndyRef, the 2016 Brexit referendum was marked by the prevalence and stability of populist anti-politics imagery, discourse institutional ambition and agency that provided little opportunity for anarchist anti-politics. In a few cases, there was a call for *informal participation* based on choosing the lesser evil of the two options.

This reluctance to participate had not always been the case with European referendums. WSM had been active in the Irish ratification referendums of 2001-2 and 2008-9, rejecting the ‘neoliberal agenda at the heart of the EU’ (WSM 2004). However, by the 2016 referendum the WSM in general and one of its members Flood (2016a) in particular argues for a return to abstention.

The UK referendum on continued EU membership is one where little real choice is actually on offer. Crudely, the choice could be said to be one between a UK under the control of the British bosses and a UK under the control of British bosses with some oversight by EU bosses. The parts of the left that are invested in the issue on both sides have advanced various arguments as to why one or the other of those setups might result in more favourable legislation for workers in the UK with citizenship. *This isn't a gamble we find at all useful*

and on that level we would simply abstain or spoil our votes in the referendum. (Emphasis added)

Whilst West Sussex Anarchists (2016) were one of the few to support a leave vote for the reasons WSM had supported No votes in earlier EU referendums in Ireland, most anarchist groups did not take an active position on Brexit campaign. In this case, the consequence of the anarchist critique of democracy meant anti-electoral activism. The abstentionist Dickens (2011) for instance espoused the same anti-capitalist criticisms of the EU as the WSM and West Sussex Anarchists but did not consider either side of a referendum as worthy of support.

However, after the vote and the spike in racist attacks many were concerned at the political outcome of the decision to Leave and the encouragement this gave to racist groups (Flood 2016b). As the similarly abstentionist Anarchist Federation (2017) sanguinely acknowledged: ‘2016 was very demoralising, and 2017 is looking worse’ (Anarchist Federation 2017). Rising racism and nationalist bigotry make anti-hierarchical *demoi*-cratic practices based on compassion, solidarity and mutual aid far harder to achieve. However, the two sides of the referendum were all too frequently portrayed as sharing core statist and economically liberal principles. This meant that even those anarchists, who do engage in electoral interventions found it hard to participate in the campaign.

Direct democracy and anarchist constitutionalism

Minor Formal Engagement with existing parties

As described above especially in the Brexit referendum but also the Scottish Independence referendum there was discussion of voting for one side or the other based on avoiding the worse outcome (lesser evil). In these cases advocates did not regard participation in the campaign as providing any opportunity for more radical transformative politics, but seeing the electoral process,

and the ways in which it was conducted as a way of negating direct action politics, a position shared with abstentionists like anarchist historian Robert Graham (2016).

A further variant, especially with Scottish Independence referendum, was more enthusiastic support for the anti-Unionist side though without active support for the official campaign or support for a social democratic outcome. It was aimed just at the undermining of Unionist structures, as this would provide opportunities for radical change (see for instance Class War's Martin Wright 2014). This position appealed more to the anarchist critique claiming that no constitutional readjustment would provide liberation and advocated for the option that allows for greatest extra-parliamentary direct action.

Structural reformism

This more enthusiastic endorsement of minor engagement in some instance lead to more active engagement with radical social democrats in the Radical Independence Campaign. Here it was felt that as an independent Scotland would have better social structures for greater radical transformation. A number of Scottish anarchists joined RIC, using it to offer some criticisms of the SNP's limited view of independence, but their main concern was on winning the referendum vote than offering a criticism of the underlying limitations of statist democracy.

Those adopting this tactic were criticised for adopting structural reformism, leading to the co-option of anti-hierarchical movements into representative democratic politics. This criticism seemed vindicated when RIC unsuccessfully restructured itself after IndyRef as a radical social democratic party, RISE, based on the Greek radical party *SYRIZA* (Gordon 2015). Unfortunately, for RISE this was just a few days before its Greek model acquiesced to the *Troika* and implemented austerity measures that RISE was committed to rejecting. This appeal to *SYRIZA* illustrates the very

problems of constitutional radicalism: electoral success based just on control of government does not capture other intersecting structures of power. A radical socialist government means capital flight out of the country leaving the socialist government and the wider country without access to vital resources and threatened by internal and external (sometimes militarised) opposition

As noted above WSM have been active in a number of referendum campaigns in the Irish Republic. These have included the extension of civil liberties through ending constitutional bans on divorce (1986, 1995) and abortion (2018) and against ratifying EU treaties (2008 and 2009), because of the neo-liberal project the EU represented (WSM 2004, 2009). Reform, as Leonard Williams (2018) explains, is not a binary opposite of revolutionary change, though state structured interventions are used to defuse potentially more radical change, but they do not outright reject them in all circumstances as in some contexts they assist in building revolutionary networks (Williams 2018, 182).

They will have to weigh and balance the ethical and political implications of engaging in this sort of struggle or joining with that sort of movement. Faced with an inherent ambivalence, rooted in every sort of gradualism, the most likely response to any given reform is “yes, but...”. (*Ibid*, 184)

Opponents of constitutional engagement, whilst recognising the strengths of potential reform are likely to calculate the risks of recuperation as too high for participation. Supporters of constitutional engagement, similarly are aware of the risks but calculate the benefits differently. The more consistent ones are constantly, consciously aware that in making reforms through the constitutional process they are also overtly critiquing it and attempting to move beyond it (‘yes, but..’) (Asher 2015).

Revolutionary (Anti-)Representation

One way of avoiding endorsement of state-centred interventions, whilst recognising that referendums can help develop mass participation campaigns and encourage wider social movements (see WSM 2018) is to campaign for a referendum without seeking to use it as an instrument for implementing policy. It thus echoes the role of the elected representative in revolutionary (anti-)representation, as the campaign for their election gives legitimacy to the ideas they represent, so too the campaign for holding a referendum on a particular issue shows the strength of support for that radical idea. Just as the elected representative, in this strategy, makes it clear that they do not enact policy but seek to use their position for symbolic purposes to promote alternative forms of politics, so too the campaign for the referendum is not intended to produce a change to legislation, but highlight and promote alternative, anti-systemic approaches.

This form of anti-politics is more feasible in countries that allow for citizens' initiatives. It seems consistent with anarchist prefigurative principles. Some radical parties have used the cover of gathering significant signatures as a non-threatening way to begin political conversations with strangers and to collect contact information for potential recruits sympathetic to wider goals rather than realistically generate a winnable referendum. However, this indicates some of the problems. The collection of signatories for apparently a citizens' initiative is actually used to promote a different set of political actions. Unless it is made abundantly clear that winning or even attempting to run a referendum was not the goal, then the dishonesty involved conflicts with the prefigurative characteristics of integrity and anti-hierarchy. Unlike guerrilla activism in which electoral participation is overtly marked by a critique of the process, this form of (anti-)representation appears to be an endorsement of democratic politics and its actual function is only clear later (if at all).

Where it is overt that promotion of the referendum is not for structural reform, it can look confusing or contradictory. *Trotwatch*, a UK-based group that produced occasional satirical but well-researched analysis of Leninist movements, were aware of its potential absurdity of this strategy. Trotwatch picked out for ridicule a Labour Party entryist group, Socialist Organiser (now the Alliance for Workers Liberty), who in the early 1990s called for a UK-wide referendum on the proposed restructuring of the EU (known as the Maastricht Treaty) to develop a campaign highlighting the EU's capitalist bias, rather than using it to force legislative change. 'Marxist Maastricht Mayhem: Socialist Organiser is demanding a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty – but if it gets one, it's demanding that everyone abstain! *Oh dear...*' (Trotwatch 1992, 37).

Guerrilla participation

In countries without citizen's initiatives, most referendums arise from conflicts within the ruling political elites, with many of these divisions arising from social movement campaigns (such as the Irish abortion rights referendum). Given that it is the leadership of the state that sets the question to be asked and the limit on the answers that can be given to it, *guerrilla participation* involves highlighting these very limitations. It engages in referendums, to provoke reflection on the constraints of the question and its choices, the structures of the democratic state, to direct attention to the forms of social and economic power that have made the question appear relevant and alternative forms of anti-hierarchical political action.

In the Scottish Independence referendum a pro-Independence grouping developed which referred to itself as 'Yes but...'. It used the IndyRef campaign to pose critical questions not just of the union but also of the supposed alternative and the political structures who supported it. 'Yes but' activists joined in meetings and demonstrations organised by the formal, party political Yes campaign as well as their own events and used these interactions to highlight the limitations of the discourse of

‘independence’ in a global capitalist economy. It highlighted many of the criticisms of the abstentionist groups, but through taking a preferred stance in the referendum (Asher and French 2014). It overtly encouraged a wider questioning of social power than that offered in the binary question of small neo-liberal state or larger neo-liberal state that was placed in front of Scottish voters. Leigh French and Gordon Asher (2014) who share the critique of direct and representative state democracy, argue that participation in ‘Yes but...’ electoral campaigns are justifiable when they support autonomous prefigurative action of the *demos* and are unacceptable when they undermine such activity reasserting people as the well-managed national subject (*demos*). Such critical participation, although small, was possible, because the initial starting point was a largely social democratic movement that questioned at least the current state structure and thus provided access to more radical critiques. Critics from the abstentionist camp argue that directing resources into guerrilla activism is unjustified as it reasserted the institutions and norms of the national *demos* and undermined direct action (see for instance Sabot 2014). What was striking was that there was no noticeable parallel in the EU referendum as the terms of debate, whether to continue with capitalism on EU terms or on those of the World Trade Organisation, alongside a highly chauvinistic set of core concepts, provided little opportunity for anarchist subversive intervention.

Conclusion

The paper identifies the phenomena of anarchist engagements in elections, which is standardly overlooked for the more pervasive and consistent anarchist critique of electoral activism. The rejectionist argument is outlined namely: Democracy perpetuates a hierarchy between rulers (a political class) and the electorate; that power does not ultimately lie in representative state structures; that the instrumentality of electoralism has not and cannot provide the basis for liberation and that prefigurative practices are preferable. It explains how this critique is embodied into anarchist practices and discourses and marks out this form of anti-politics from populist anti-politics of Trump and UKIP, as the former is much more rigorous in its rejection of democratic

institutions, but on anti-hierarchical grounds, and seeks much more fluid, participatory alternatives. Different forms anarchist electoral engagement are usually ignored or treated as identical, however a taxonomy is developed to identify significant differences and to assess different strategies and campaigns against their own critique of electoral politics.

It identified that there are differences between forms of anarchist, electoral participation in representative elections and referendum. It argues that whilst abstentionist campaigns remains the dominant, and frequently the most consistent response, there are grounds for some forms of participation, with selective satirical guerrilla activism being the most likely to be consistent with anarchist principles. On the face of it referendum would appear to be less problematic for anarchists than representative democracy as it involves the public making decisions directly without being dependent on an intermediary political class. However, in almost all cases referendums are the product of the political class and utilised for their goals, thus they often provide less room for subversive interventions. Nonetheless, there have been times when anarchists have participated in referendums, in its different forms from minor participation (lesser evil) to guerrilla subversion. These referendums campaigns provide an opportunity to engage in an important political debate, introducing and developing the anarchist critique and finding potentially new avenues of solidarity that promote *demoi*-cratic direct action. There are risks of such a strategy as it can lead to supporting statist institutions and appearing to support social democracy reaffirming the *demos* at the expense of the richer and more threatening multitude. Such opportunities for anarchist interventions are lessened rather than strengthened by the intensity of nationalist capitalist anti-politics.

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