# Anarchism as Desire: Anti-Authoritarian Networks in California's Bay Area[1]

*El anarquismo como deseo: las redes anti-autoritarias en la Bahía de California*

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## Abstract

*Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, there has been a strong proliferation of struggles globally, which have displaced the State and other dominant institutions as the main sites for social transformation. Instead of attempting to take power and impose a counter-hegemony, these struggles seek to organize themselves towards new social forms without the relations of domination and processes of exploitation inherent in the patriarchal-capitalist system. In much of the global North, these currents have an explicitly anarchist ethos rooted in direct action as a framework for a life reorientation, within a set of values that are antagonistic to the current social or-*

## Resumen

*Desde el inicio del siglo veintiuno ha habido una fuerte proliferación global de luchas que han desplazado al Estado y a otras instituciones dominantes como los sitios principales para la transformación social. En lugar de intentar tomar el poder e imponer una contra-hegemonía, estas luchas buscan organizarse hacia nuevas formas sociales sin las relaciones de dominación y procesos de explotación inherentes al sistema patriarcal-capitalista. En la mayoría del Norte global, estas corrientes tienen un ethos explícitamente anarquista que se basa en la acción directa como un marco para la reorientación de la vida dentro de un conjunto de valores antagónicos al orden social actual. Al mismo tiempo, como sujetos del proyecto neoliberal, los activistas tienden a reproducir formas de relación capitalistas basadas en lógicas neoliberales como el híper-individualismo y el auto-emprendimiento, mismas que socavan sus esfuerzos.*

*Este artículo explora cómo las formas anarquistas de resistencia y el neoliberalismo como la cultura del capitalismo se*

*der. At the same time, as subjects of the neoliberal project, activists tend to reproduce capitalist ways of relating based on neoliberal logics such as hyper-individualism and self-entrepreneurship which undermine their efforts.*

*This paper explores the ways in which anarchist forms of resistance and neoliberalism as the culture of capitalism shape one another. Drawing mainly from ethnographic research carried out with anti-authoritarian networks in the California's Bay Area between the spring of 2016 and winter of 2017, I offer a micro-political analysis of how these contradictions manifest —particularly how individual forms of activism preclude the construction of social infrastructures which can meaningfully support people's participation. By tracing these struggles' discontinuities and continuities with neoliberal ideology, I not only seek to contribute to the growing body of literature about these movements but hope to open up a space to critically think with them in an act of solidarity.*

**Key words:** anarchism, social movements, neoliberalism, direct action, individualism.

*moldean mutuamente. Basado principalmente en una investigación etnográfica con redes antiautoritarias en el área de la Bahía de California entre la primavera de 2016 y el invierno de 2017, ofrezco un análisis micro-político sobre cómo se manifiestan estas contradicciones, en particular, en cómo las formas individuales de activismo impiden la construcción de infraestructuras sociales que puedan impulsar de manera significativa la participación de las personas. Al rastrear las discontinuidades y continuidades de estas luchas con la ideología neoliberal, no sólo busco contribuir al creciente cuerpo de literatura sobre estos movimientos, sino que espero abrir un espacio para pensar críticamente con ellos en un acto de solidaridad.*

**Palabras claves:** anarquismo, movimientos sociales, neoliberalismo, acción directa, individualismo.

I'm urging towards this other world that
my soul is very attached to.
You see flashes of it. Like the other day
I was with Ari [at the community garden],
and she was carrying these enormous collards the size
of her torso. Seeing her with those leaves filled me
with this really beautiful, and kind of painful longing.

Ari asked [me], "Longing for what?"
And I said, "Longing for this other world… for another world."
She says [sic], "Here it is! We're here.
We are harvesting this food and life is simple and direct."
So sometimes you see flashes of it.
-Oakland squatter activist

## Introduction

In the last twenty years, social movements in the United States have experienced a spread of anti-authoritarian currents that are characterized by a *turning away* from the logic of dominant socio-political forms, including liberal institutions and mainstream political processes. Anti-authoritarian attitudes have, indeed, permeated the radical left for several decades, beginning with the New Social Movements when activists began to move away from centralized, top-down structures for organizing protests, in favor of more decentralized forms of coordinated actions based on small affinity groups. As activists developed more nuanced and situated analyses of power, class was also displaced as the only (or main) field of struggle, and movement spaces began experimenting with new social forms that could fight against various forms of oppression (Kauffman, 2017). Yet, as Richard Day (2004) asserts, these previous movements still operated within a *politics of demand*, wherein activists seek to influence the State so it can ameliorate social conditions around certain issues. Within this frame, any gains achieved by some "only appear as such within

the logic of the existing order, and often come at a high cost for others" (Day, 2005: 80). In contrast to this, today's movements are increasingly shifting towards a *politics of the act* which challenge deeply held notions that the State and its institutions are the only way in which society can be organized (Day, 2004).

Within this growing anti-authoritarian current, anarchism is of particular significance because it is able to "push beyond the possibilities and limits of liberal reform", while contributing to efforts that seek to concretely improve present-day living conditions (Day, 2005: 5). This helps us overcome the paradoxical dichotomy of reform or revolution that has defined Marxist political movements for so long. Anarchism nurtures a vision of a world "in which many worlds fit", which is based in acts of solidarity, valuing heterogeneity, and safeguarding human dignity. This *affinity for affinity* is specifically opposed to attempts to create a counter-hegemony as this would only ensure that we remain within a line of thought that maintains the current relations of power (Day 2004: 9). As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) asserts, "The global bourgeoisie feels that its historical victory has been accomplished, and the accomplished victor is only interested in *the repetition of the present* (added emphases) (p. 74). Instead, anti-authoritarian movements seek to radically disrupt logics that are universalizing, hierarchical, and coercive (Day, 2005). Since the State and its institutions do not exist over us but constitute our very relations, "living without the state form means living our lives differently" and transforming ourselves (Day, 2005: 125).

Within anti-authoritarian currents a life re-orientation takes place through the framework of anarchist direct action. Here direct action is expanded beyond its common understanding as a tactic for protest or demonstration into life strategies and production of culture which have wider ripple effects. Yet these important shifts are also affected by their neoliberal context. This research paper explores anarchist direct action as counter-cultural production in the present-day technology capital of the world— the Bay Area in California. It offers a micro-political exa-

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mination of how autonomous forms of organizing create spaces of possibility and also operate through neoliberal logics. Anarchist currents in the United States struggle against powerful structures that reproduce pervasive forms of hyper-individualism and exchange-value, while also reflecting these social forms. This is most manifest in the network's inadequacy to create meaningful social infrastructures that are able to sustain activists' political participation over time. Hence, activists often remain in crises response and have difficulty building collective power that can offer significant forms of material or affective support. Although these may seem to be practical issues related to strategy, they are of a more ontological character which makes them so difficult to address as they are connected to ways of knowing and being in the world that are largely unconscious.

Echoing an anarchist logic of disruption, I employ a critical lens that takes the *instability* of the social and highlights the inherent contradictions within capitalism. It also helps us discern the contradictions between the (anarchist) movement's *interior horizon*— what activists say, imagine, desire and do— and its *practical reach* in the world as it is constituted materially and symbolically (Gutiérrez-Aguilar, 2013: 17). I hope this critical methodology can be useful in overcoming anti-authoritarian movements' main challenges and also help further potentialize their strengths. I begin this work with an exploration of direct action in its expanded frame, followed by an exploration of neoliberalism and its constitutive effects on society and its individuals. In the third section, I introduce my field research which explores what it is like to navigate and participate in direct action organizing in a site of hyper-accumulation. This is supported by activists' own words highlighting the possibilities and hope, as well as forms of competition and alienation. In the final section I offer some reflections on why anarchism as a powerful productive force can still dissipate within the channels of value-exchange and realization, unless it is suffused into a more radically collective way of understanding and being in the struggle.

On a final note regarding methodology, although my work is strongly influenced by militant ethnography[2], I occupied an insider/outsider position to my site for a couple of important reasons. First, although I share a political commitment to dismantle systems of oppression and find anarchism to be one of the most inspiring proposals within advanced capitalist societies, I was quite new to direct action itself. So, while I became an active participant in the network, the process of political socialization was fresh. Second, while I spent the second half of my life in the United States, I was born and grew up in Bolivia (where my family is from) until I was a teenager. Hence my experience within this network was embedded in larger social structures and relations which did not appear natural to me, but which I have had to learn for years after moving from my home country.

In terms of the significance of this study, though threads of convergence connect the anti-authoritarian networks across the globe, the anarchist worlds are also territorialized in space-time by the specific social geography and histories from which they emerge. Focusing our attention on both their universal and particular dimensions helps create a fuller perspective of how radical resistance can manifest across different contexts. Furthermore, much of the research on social movements and resistance studies centers on structurally oppressed or marginal groups, as their *outsider* position provides us with invaluable perspectives. However, paying closer attention to actors occupying more privileged positions makes important contributions in different ways –it may deepen our understanding of how power gets internalized, for example, or the ways in which movement actors' actions become normative. Since activists within anti-authoritarian networks tend to benefit from the current system in various ways (i.e. they tend to be middle-class whites) and accordingly have

2 For great examples of militant ethnographies of today's anarchist movements see: Jeffrey Juris' *Networking Futures: The Movements against Corporate Globalization*, Marianne Maeckelbergh's *The Will of the Many: How the Alterglobalisation Movement is Changing the Face of Democracy*, or Maple Razsa's *Bastards of Utopia: Living Radical Politics After Socialism.*

more resources and opportunities at their disposal, a critical and engaged scholarship offers an important space for reflection to find more effective ways to engage in practical solidarity –particularly with those who struggle from more marginalized positions.

## The Politics of Direct Action

At the heart of the anti-authoritarian current is direct action, which refers to any effort aimed at creating change outside mainstream channels and often denotes a degree of militancy (Graeber, 2009). Unlike civil disobedience, direct action is not simply an appeal for authority figures to implement positive reforms on pressing social problems, but it is an "unmediated intervention" in reality, as activists themselves "confront injustices *and build alternatives to capitalism*" (Gordon, 2008: 4). Although direct action is perceived as mainly white and masculine, it is the product of decades of rich intermingling of organizing practices and perspectives which came out of struggles of people of color and queer-feminist praxis (Dixon, 2014; Kauffman, 2017). By the 1980s, a model for planning and executing large-scale actions had been developed in the United States, which sought to reflect the movement's values and "embody a new way of living and acting" (Kauffman 2017: 63). Direct action is hence intimately tied to practices of prefiguration, as the efforts that are undertaken must themselves reflect the social relations of equality, freedom and joy that is their ultimate goal (Franks, 2003). In this context, anarchism with its espousal of revolution of everyday life, re-emerged as a significant part of social movements today.

Because anti-authoritarian activists do not prescribe any sort of grand program for society, those outside anarchist movements tend to look at it with grave suspicion. How do we talk about a social movement that appears as mostly "*submerged*" (Gordon, 2008) or simply subcultural, and which seems to orient its efforts away from politics as such? First, we must note that activists

within these networks are engaged in a way that is wholly *political* –in that they seek to transform our relations and the ways in which our social world is organized (Gutiérrez-Aguilar, 2013; Gordon, 2008; Mouffe, 2005). This leads to the creation of an "intricate political culture" that is shared across proliferating and often overlapping networks. Anarchism is "a family of shared orientations to doing and talking about politics" and "to living everyday life" which turns away from conventional politics and mainstream institutions while actively working towards a different vision of what life could be (Gordon, 2008: 4). This cultural production is rooted in a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic, forms of autonomy, and ecological (re)connection –all of which are largely antithetical to the current system.

Direct action creates a field for the pursuit of forms of value that respond to activists' desire to create concrete alternatives to the hetero-patriarchal capitalism which currently organizes our lives (Graeber, 2013). This largely shapes activists' everyday lives and relations –from where to live to what kind of jobs to undertake– which then ripple out to have a wider social effect. The activities that are part of their wide-ranging repertoire include practicing direct-democracy; establishing and self-managing their own anti-capitalist social spaces; creating independent forms of media; and experimenting with new relationship forms outside of monogamy and the nuclear family. A constitutive aspect in all this is the rejection of anything that is seen as related to a middle-class lifestyle (often disparaged as "*liberal*" in the United States). In refusing the most salient aspects of the bourgeoisie's material culture based on comfort and consumerism, activists engage in the construction of an "identity narrative" that rejects liberal values in a process that is collective and individual, as well as material and discursive (Portwood-Stacer, 2012).

The aim within anarchist currents is not to produce an all-encompassing counter-hegemony to the current system but to function through a logic of affinity to create living alternatives (Day, 2005). This disrupts the type of *abyssal thinking* wherein the cu-

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rrent systems of domination relegate all histories, perspectives and ways of life which do not fit within their narrow definitions of the world to "the other side of the line" where they become invisible or simply unthinkable (Santos, 2014: 118). On *this* side of the abyssal line, legal and scientific institutions condition how we conceive of our social relations; hence our current understandings of freedom and responsibility are significantly constrained by the State form, Both hegemony and the State are mutually constitutive, recent historical formations which feed the assumption that there can be no social order and no freedom without the individual's subjection to the State (Day, 2005). The New Social Movements of the latter twentieth century began to shift away from hegemony, as they were no longer attempting to achieve "one totalized transformation of society" but were still appealing to the State for ameliorating effects (Day, 2005: 70). Today's contemporary networking logic of affinity turns away from both and firmly rejects the assertion that the current neoliberal system is indeed the end of history (Day, 2005).

## Neoliberalism as the Culture of Capitalism

Contemporary anarchism re-emerged during a period of intensified exploitation, capitalist accumulation and global expansion. Over the past forty years or so, a complex web of practices and institutions developed that has radically contributed to the reproduction and multiplication of various forms of oppression as daily life has become "more intensely immersed in capitalist accumulation and rational-bureaucratic control" (Day, 2005: 6). The brutal efficacy of neoliberalism is that it is not simply the imposition of an ideology that masks an objective reality, but the deployment of a new form of governmentality that produces a material reality in its own image (Brown, 2006; Harvey, 2005). Whereas classic liberalism advanced the free-market— equated with individual freedom— to be a natural phenomenon whose

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functioning should simply not be interfered with by any government, neoliberalism works through a distinct *political rationality* that extends the logic of the market to all spheres of society and which centers not just exchange but competition (Brown, 2006; Read, 2009). Furthermore, although both political formations rest on the notion of *homo-economicus*, neoliberalism does not claim to safeguard a supposed human nature, but "normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life" (Brown, 2009: 42).

This normative neoliberal production has profound consequences for how we construct our everyday lives, the types of relations we form, and the types of views we hold about the world. It conditions ways of thinking based on cost-benefit logics that are then actively promoted through a myriad of policies and institutions (Read, 2009). In an advanced-capitalist society like the United States, where the reproduction of life has been almost entirely put to work for capitalism –including healthcare, practices of consumption and people's ability to communicate–, the neoliberal project has been particularly successful, reflecting a culture of capitalism which "rewards individuals who comply with market-shaped criteria to measure, judge and discipline themselves in pursuit of a self-reliant, entrepreneurial form of life" (Rutherford, 2008: 13). This all comes into tension within anti-authoritarian spaces where activists seek to form relations based on solidarity and collaboration instead of individual competition. Yet "at the exact moment in which all of social existence becomes labor, or potential labor, neoliberalism constructs the image of a society of capitalists" (Read, 2009: 33).

Neoliberalism, as a biopolitical apparatus that organizes and conditions all social relations, creates individuals-as-producers with particular "needs, social relations, bodies and minds", which presents serious challenges for any radical project (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 32). Echoing these difficulties Erica Lagalisse (2016) observes that "*even* self-identified anarchists, who organize autonomously from the state and its institutions reproduce

[…] neoliberal structures of value and self-making" (p. 27). Lagalisse exposes the ways in which anarchists, who often begin having a fair amount of capital (i.e. educated middle-class whites), engage in the continuous accrual of value by becoming players in the "anti-oppression game". Building on Pierre Bourdieu's[3] work on *habitus* and the ways elites misrecognize class power for "good taste", Lagalisse (2016) shows how activists' performances of "good politics" function in a similar way. Though anarchists are not involved with mainstream liberal institutions, the same neoliberal logics determine the field "on the level of culture and affect" (p. 371). Hence careful presentations as a "self-contained, self-conscious person" with the "proper" intersectional politics reinforce neoliberal notions of selfhood based on property and value-exchange, and also reproduce forms of hierarchy and exclusion (p. 278).

The "accrual of property and value in the self" via various technologies –on which present-day anarchists' performances are based– is indeed something that has taken shape over the course of centuries. As Beverly Skeggs (2004) asserts, there is an "intimate link between economic and moral value" as the dominant symbolic framework rests on a type of "accumulative subjectivity" that is able to appropriate things such as culture as a form of exchange-value (p. 74). These technologies of self share close similarities with the seventeenth century notion of *possessive individualism,* which treats all persons and things –including one's own body– as something one can stand in relation to *as property.* The ability to take one's own dispositions as well as *the dispositions of other persons*, as a form of property, was what most significantly distinguished the sovereign individual from those who were *only* constituted as sources of labor (Skeggs, 2004: 76). Hence the possessive individual came to be legally –through the framework of individual rights– and also morally legitimated over

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3 See Pierre Bourdieu's 1996 8ᵗʰ edition of *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste.*

time, becoming institutionalized as "*the* dominant symbolic model for proper personhood" (Skeggs, 2011: 501).

With the transition from liberalism to neoliberalism normative ideas of proper personhood have simply become expanded as "an ideal imperative to all", carrying with it an almost moral duty "to accrue value to oneself", thereby also reproducing all manners of hierarchy and class power (Skeggs, 2011: 499). As Lagalisse (2016) acutely notes, the structure of neoliberalism, which subjects activists to become game players mainly concerned "with impressing others by performing 'good politics'", significantly hampers "practical acts of solidarity" across various political struggles (p. 309). This also places serious constrains on processes of mutual collaboration within small collectives themselves and negatively impacts organizing efforts to produce real alternatives that do not simply exist side-by-side as mere appendages to the dominant system. A main challenge is that it limits the possibility of creating alternatives which can be sustained long-term *and be sustaining for* those who participate in them. In this vein, Nazima Kadir (2016) observes that though there is an "unromantic and sober sense of solidarity" that functions in the everyday, this is largely taken for granted within the movement and, most significantly, does not appear in the "value system from which it confers status" (p. 203).

## Anti-authoritarian Networks in the Bay Area, California

> I knew there were a lot of fucked up things going on in the world and I wanted to see different things in the world, but I just didn't know there was a whole community out here— not just here in California but in general. Communities that are trying to make that change.
> -Oakland activist

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I remember being led over there by Clara who had
been doing [direct action] for some time, and it just felt like
there was some significance to what had just happened
that I hadn't been in tune with before—and I remember her
really getting across that this is a struggle you can *plug into.*
A struggle for a lot of different things, for students to have
a space to learn about sustainable agriculture,
but also a land access issue.
-Berkeley activist

Northern California, where the rolling hills meet the Pacific Ocean, has always signified innovation, expansion, and liberal freedom (culturally and economically) within the social imaginary of the vast empire that is the United States of America. Constituted as frontier through deregulation, public-private partnerships favoring corporate profits, and urban re-development that destroys and replaces local relationships, the Bay Area is indeed a particular kind of edge where practices of extraction thrive, creating "extravagant new economies of profit" and loss (Tsing, 2005: 28). Here direct-action collectives and activist spaces –some of which are registered as legal non-profits– fight against various forms of precarity, displacement and heightened forms of social control, as the explosion of technology industries and the so-called sharing economies based on unpaid forms of labor have turned the entire region into a major capitalist frontier over the decades. In this socio-political context, one of the most prominent characteristics that defines these activist networks manifests itself as a radicalized rejection of the social order based on private property, material comfort and hyper-consumerism so characteristic of the United States.

The shared view that private property is "completely illegitimate" is often expressed in various forms across different contexts –from casual conversations to statements made during organizing meetings, to more in-depth reflections offered during interviews. Most activists work part-time or side *gigs*, and virtually

none share mainstream ideas of success –mainly having professional careers and accumulating material possessions in order to reach a level of comfort–, as this is all seen to be a "false sense of security". Yet an important aspect of this radical rejection is that it is not steeped in a nihilistic cynicism, but in feelings of hope. Instead of acquiescing to things as they are or being disengaged from everyday struggles, activists become active participants in their own self-liberation, as well as in efforts to empower others to do the same. In the context of the Bay Area, which is undergoing intense processes of gentrification and "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2005), a key site of struggle is the idea that "spaces should be used for community good", and particularly that if they are "not being used for anything" –other than a placeholder for speculators' profits– then "that fence should come down".

The more one delves into the network, the more one can see examples of different ways to live. This opens up possibilities that were previously foreclosed –perhaps because of ideology (in the pejorative sense), because of pessimism, or simply because of fear. Through direct action as a lifestyle, activists continuously search for opportunities to practice forms of support in ways that might also challenge mainstream power structures, since one of direct action's key principles is *tension* – "it has to create conflict". This manifests in many different ways, for example leaving a party at midnight in response to a call to build an autonomous encampment because homelessness is seen as "completely and utterly unacceptable". On a deeper level this can be reflected in the significant place *trust* holds in activists' praxis. Because of the radical, antagonistic and usually extra-legal character of direct action, it takes enormous amounts of trust-building in ways that simply do not take place within institutionally mediated relationships. Since action is usually oriented *away* from the dominant systems and mainstream institutions –as these are seen as the source of (or at least contributing to) our social problems– actions become oriented towards each other. It is in this re-orientation towards one another, where activists attempt to forge new

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relationship forms and perspectives –which offers, in my view, the most hope.

Through engaging in forms of direct action, a multiplicity of activities are able to visibly shape the city's geography and contribute to everyday social justice struggles. Although political *wins* more-often than not are temporary –gardens get developed, squats get evicted and radical projects become variously captured by the system–, "every example that can keep galvanizing people is really useful" as it demonstrates "that you *can* create what you want to see" through collective action. Of course, this is not meant to say that *anyone* at *any time* can literally create what they want, regardless of their social position (including class, race and gender), as stating this would be irresponsible. However, during their flourishing periods, these projects provide opportunities for learning and growth, connect people, and at the very least slow down capitalist destruction. Moreover, each experience helps other things germinate across the social landscape, which in itself is already "a real success". As a seasoned activist expressed in an interview, "If it's so powerful that it brings people with disparate ideas and desires and empowers them to pursue those ideas and desires, that's amazing. That's the point of direct action." However, as one engages in direct action for a sustained period, key limitations begin to clearly emerge, not only on practical and interpersonal levels but on a more *epistemic* one.

Despite their own definitions, most people within the network are not usually involved in organizing but are often engaged in individual forms of activism. When there are attempts to organize collectively, these efforts are not horizontal but tend to have an invisible hierarchical structure with one or two people making decisions for a group of *volunteers*. Moreover, the goal of these organizing efforts usually consists of mobilizing large numbers of people towards a single or one-off action that would not have significant or long-lasting effects –for example occupying a public building– as it does not form part of a larger strategy. Each action planned contains its own logic within itself and is its own strategy.

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Moreover, when there is a vision to build something substantial that could provide meaningful alternatives –for example, use a massive building to create a social center– they often don't get off the ground because of a "lack of capacity". Hence, although the actions belong to a broader political discourse such as "land reclamation" or "sustainable agriculture" they are not inscribed within a political *process* of transformation that is assumed by each collective member.

In my experience, most activists volunteered their time, efforts and skills to various projects or actions as *autonomous individuals* who accomplished specific tasks: building planters, weeding gardens or doing repairs in an old building. Organizing meetings would almost always begin with each person *checking-in* with an update of their individual activism by sharing their current participation in some political project or space, and letting others know if more people or certain skills were immediately needed. Since most things worked through word of mouth and personal relationships, these check-ins did the important work of relaying information and garnering material support for different efforts. However, rarely did meetings serve as spaces to come up with long-term strategies or do political groundwork. Activists usually remained engaged in emergency response –such as stopping an eviction or recording police interaction with homeless encampments– or responded to more militant days of action where their participation was clearly pre-defined. Activists also responded to their own needs and wants –such access to housing or food– in individualized ways which would then be recounted to other activists in the appropriate stage –for example a squatter meeting. Similarly, forms of support between people would be volunteered individually instead of as collective effort.

During my research, the most common way large actions were organized (within different collectives) was to get individuals to *plug in* to a pre-planned structure with a revolving door of volunteers who could participate by completing specific tasks during the planning, filling particular roles during the direct action itself,

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or a combination of both. This meant that power was not shared equally within the collective even among people who regularly attended *organizing meetings* leading to the day of action –despite declarations that decisions were made by process of consensus. A common template used for land-based direct actions was the following: build team, community outreach, media, food & entertainment and police & community liaison. Even when there weren't enough people to fill those roles, such as for "twenty-six simultaneous occupations" to create micro-farms all across Oakland, the same template would be externally imposed by one or two people during meetings. Furthermore, *who* came to meetings was largely indifferent since any volunteer would simply get *plugged in* to one of the predetermined roles. Similarly, activist spaces which were meant to function as open social centers were often kept running by a few core people and a string of volunteers which made them inaccessible and difficult to *plug into.*

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the two main challenges that pervaded the network were lack of capacity and burn-out. As each person's activism was conceived as a property external to themselves instead of as a collective process towards the construction of a common vision, there seemed to be a constant dearth of support for all kinds of actions. Organizing meetings usually served as sites where activists could demonstrate how much direct action they had *achieved.* Indeed, the central place of autonomy within anarchism sheds light into the movement's most serious contradictions. Although autonomy is most often referred to in terms of a "communal and mutual-aid perspective", a self-governing type of autonomy is displayed wherein every person chooses their associations and level of commitment based on self-interest –both in the sense of what one enjoys as well as in the capitalist sense of accrual. As Lagalisse (2016) argues, autonomy "involves a fantasy of absolute personal power that presumes a strict independence of individuals, which must be mitigated by a correlate call for 'mutual aid'—the other side of the same coin" (p. 140). Hence, the *network* becomes "the best

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way to acknowledge relationality without compromising either the practice or imagination of bourgeois autonomy" wherein individuals can effectively network while remaining "at a comfortable distance" from each other (p. 372).

Echoing the neoliberal conceptualization of human capital, activists performed direct action as means of accruing value which can only be recognized within a rational system of exchange, treating their labor power in an entrepreneurial manner. Those with more direct action under their belt could then place themselves in higher positions akin to a manager or foreman (above those deemed volunteers), and exercise authority within the role of the expert. Within this *do-ocracy* activists routinely engaged in competition around the amount of labor they did, since performing direct action was one of the main ways to have power in the group. Forms of labor that were more physically taxing were consistently perceived to have more value, reflecting capitalist logics of utility and productivity, as well as an able-bodied masculine ideal (Lagalisse, 2010). This all intersected most problematically with other forms of oppression, as women and people of color would often end up doing most of the leg-work to get projects off the ground or execute large-scale actions. Although generally speaking the accrued value was not converted to economic capital in the way of a paid position in an organization, it did garner the player various types of social and material rewards. More importantly, it allowed certain people to manage and deploy the labor of those with perceived less human capital.

Activist spaces themselves tended to function as sites for realization and exchange of value instead of spaces for *horizontalidad* based in an affective politics that focuses on the cultivation of forms of mutuality and care (Sitrin, 2006). Within the direct-action logic fruitful questions such as "What does it mean for us to organize ourselves today?", which underlie popular and working-class struggles, were not given any space to emerge and serve as a starting point for a collective inquiry that could shape relationships and guide actions (Sitrin, 2006: 55). Without hori-

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zontality as an ongoing process, wherein activists come together to figure out what they wanted to see realized and how they could get there together, organizing dynamics often created confusion and disappointment around the way actions were planned and how decisions were made. Moreover a rich repertoire of forms of knowledge, as well as personal desires and meanings that each person could potentially contribute were not recuperated as part of a collective process. As *autonomous individuals*, activists simply coordinated their individual actions within a logic of self-entrepreneurship in which they competed to complete tasks while attempting to solve why building capacity was ever so elusive.

Actions which were usually centrally conceived and planned were presented in meetings structured around formalized consensus which simply gave the appearance of being inclusive. However, formalized consensus –as noted by many activists of color– often serves to further engender power dynamics, since highly stylized ways of comportment rooted in masculine-bourgeois forms of self-presentation are what determine the rules of the game and who wins. This not only hampers efforts towards *horizontalidad* but also perpetuates forms of (white) power within movement spaces (Lagalisse, 2016: 282). Given these dynamics, people of color and black organizers did not seem interested in organizing as part of these collectives as they experienced the process as oppressive and exploitative. In the end all activists experienced periods of emotional burn-out which sadly made direct action feel unsustainable and, contrary to movement's common-sense that "direct action gets the goods", also largely ineffective. Soon after they were initiated, all activists learned the importance of asserting "healthy boundaries" in order to not have their lives consumed by an action that was usually ultimately being directed by someone else, while they dealt with their own feelings and conditions of precarity.

## Anarchism as Desire

A profound *urge-to* constitutes anti-authoritarian networks. Activists engage in direct action as a shared philosophy and method for social transformation in the present-day. Its main promise is in how this praxis radically breaks from traditional politics and the logic of hegemony-- which in the final analysis is a logic of force that emerged out of the process of modernity and the consolidation of the State form. This productive desire offers possible *lines of escape* towards new types of social configurations based on ecological (re)connection, mutual-aid, and self-organization that seek to subvert all social structures based on domination (Deleuze and Guttari, 2000). At the same time, these efforts too often dissipate between big moments of intensity (militant actions/demonstrations) and performances of activism largely based on competition (meetings and work-days) which scarcely contribute towards social infrastructures that can provide meaningful material and affective forms of support. This not only limits the ability of a large variety of people to participate in direct action-as-lifestyle, but it also leads to constant burn-out among activists themselves and prevents long-term forms of commitment (Kadir, 2016).

The question remains, how will anti-authoritarian networks –which challenge the logic of modern institutions– be able to produce new social forms that are more lasting and deeply sustaining of communities of change? How can *individual* autonomy slightly recede back so that building *collective* autonomy take precedence? A key element would be that organizing activity does not continue to rely on value–exchange that mainly leads to accumulation, hierarchy and exclusion, but on processes that nurture social forms that are more collective in nature. In contrast to entrepreneurial forms of activism, activists could prioritize the production of commons wherein the material and immaterial goods for shared enjoyment are only possible *through those relationships that produce them*. This complex web of mutual obligations that materialize such commons is what Gutiérrez-Agui-

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lar, Navarro-Trujillo and Linsalata (2016) refer to as *ser parte* or *being part of*, which is rooted in a shared identification of an *us* that "emerges from within a practical sense of inclusion" (p. 389).

Opposed to this *us*, the individual can thus be conceived as another form of enclosure wherein each person "owns himself and his capacities" (Dean, 2014: 2). As Jodi Dean (2014) argues, "Instead of entailing collective reproduction for common good, training, whether moral or technical, is work on and for the self" (p. 3). This seems to be one of the main challenges for anti-authoritarian movements since, despite the fractures direct action produces in the system, profound continuities between the neoliberal subject and the anarchist-self continue to persist. At its center, I question whether anarchism itself unconsciously embraces the ideal of a free individual –or aggregate of individuals– "fantastically, independent and enduring", despite presenting a collective orientation (Dean, 2014). However, the commons as a social relation is precisely that which sustains the reproduction of life against and beyond capitalism as "a limit that it can never surpass", and for this reason is where our collective resistance and regeneration can actualize (Gutiérrez-Aguilar *et al.*, 2016: 396). Increasingly activist and scholars share Dean's concern with the individual's hold on the subject, though wholly disagree with her assertion that what is needed is a return to the Party as a political instrument for collective organization (Dean, 2016). Instead, the challenge for anti-authoritarian activists moving forward is to be able to build *lives in common* of shared responsibilities and long-term commitments through the remarkable affinity-based logic that defines them.

An important aspect of creating affinity-based, open communities would be to rediscover and recreate reciprocal relations as the basis for all action –and in particular for political efforts. The cultivation of these social ties is what not only helps overcome antagonism, but also give rise to affectivity as something that can never be generated within "atomized individuals" but only through the encounter with the other (Martínez- Gutiérrez, 2017: 61). Hence, in contrast to the *homo-economicus* who zealously

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coordinates his actions with others based on overlapping points of self-interest, the *homo-reciprocus* relishes in forms of open reciprocity based on shared values and symbolic meaning (Martínez-Gutiérrez, 2017). In this sense, the "groundless solidarity" that Day (2005) refers to, wherein our relationships become rooted in shared ethical commitments, presupposes having a curiosity about one another and the ways in which we depend on and also extend our mutual capacities. This can create opportunities for energies to flow more freely and with more intensity towards new social forms that are much more nurturing and generative.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have explored how neoliberalism and anarchism shape one another in ways that point towards hopeful possibilities and also reproduce the logic of rational exchange. The main significance of anarchist direct action lies in its radical anti-hegemonic and anti-oppression orientation which attempts to re-create new social relationships based on forms of affinity, solidarity and ethical care in an open-ended process of transformation. However, without engaging in careful and reflexive processes to unearth deeper structures on the level of epistemology and inter-subjectivity, activists' own efforts often become undermined, as they not only remain within an alienated value-exchange with each other, but also perpetuate oppressive forms that are reflective of the dominant society. This makes it difficult to establish meaningful relations with those in various other struggles –many of whom do not have the luxury of *choice* but are often fighting for their own survival. A way to shift away from this could be for activists to ground their daily praxis more on creating commons within reciprocal relations of *horizontalidad.* This can help erode the hyper-individualism that keeps people isolated and makes it easier to become re-captured by the system –particularly when it begins to feel unfeasible to provide for one self within a sustained direct action lifestyle.

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Aside from finding ways to build relations of real interdependence between each other, ongoing processes of re-education are also integral to community building efforts. These processes should seek to deconstruct abyssal thinking by engaging with other ways of knowing that are not taken as disembodied pieces of information one can appropriate but as cultural praxes embedded in concrete communities. This means cultivating a being-in-relation with others who are not part of the anarchist milieu and *for this very reason* have significant contributions through different forms of knowledge and perspective. It would mean actively forgetting about accumulating value in one's self and instead engaging in processes of creating use-values through *being part of* a struggle (whichever it may be). This can only happen by making oneself open and vulnerable, as well as by privileging others as interlocutors –not tokenizing them into a game. These are some ways anarchism could move beyond individual autonomy and mutual-aid, towards more conscious practices of thinking, seeing and doing *together.*

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