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Anarchism and Non-Representational Theory in the Social Sciences

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TOM SMITH, AUG 7 2015

Anarchism boasts a heterogeneous and rich approach which, through a thorough-going skepticism of any concentrations of power, aims to challenge domination and hierarchical modes of governance. Most famously, this takes the form of its opposition to the state apparatus. In place of the top-heavy power structures of capitalism, representative, liberal democracy and Marxism, the political economy of anarchism is one based on participatory democracy, mutual aid, solidarity and co-operation. Indeed, anarchism expresses profound and historically-substantiated misgivings not just of the state in contemporary capitalist societies, but also regarding the capture of the state by a revolutionary vanguard in Marxism.

In spite of the somewhat negative etymology of its name, translating as “without a ruler,” anarchism is a positive project which has, as Uri Gordon (2007: 47) argues, “given rise to what is arguably the largest and most coherent, vibrant and rapidly-evolving revolutionary movement in advanced capitalist countries.” The cultivation of this non-hierarchical vision contradicts the atomistic, pessimistic imagery so influential in recent social thought, which has led to inadequate caricatures of humanity such as the ruthless, self-interest-maximising *homo economicus*. However, anarchism remains relatively maligned and misunderstood both inside and outside academia, often deemed, in a rather impossible contradiction, either utopian or as a synonym for violence (Springer, 2014). Instead, as Sal Restivo (2013: 3) puts it:

If you champion the person as a social being dependent for self, thought, and consciousness on the social group or the community, if you champion and defend the rights of the person (as a social being) and the integrity and freedom of the person, if you are opposed to all forms of capitalized Authority, and if you oppose the state’s claim that it owns (is the owner of last resort of) your body and labor, you are at one with the anarchist.

My hope in this article is to demonstrate some ways in which anarchism is relevant for social science, specifically in a post-representational environment. To do this, I explore some of the productive links between the stance of anarchism and recent work in non-representational theorising in the social sciences (Ingold, 2015; Dewsbury, 2010; Thrift, 2008). By doing so, I do not suggest that non-representational theory *has* to be anarchist. Rather, I argue that it lends itself strongly to a reconsideration, even a revalorization, of anarchism in the social sciences. Finally, to illustrate this link I will turn in the last section to the sociologist Andrew Pickering (2010) for his thought-provoking exposition of performative, non-representational approaches as a sustainable and viable alternative social ontology.

Representation – Political and Epistemological

The under-theorised link between anti-representational politics, or anarchism, and the turn to non-representationalism in the social sciences is tantalisingly hinted at in a brief discussion by *de rigueur* feminist philosopher and theoretical quantum physicist Karen Barad (2007: 46), noting that:

Liberal social and political theories and theories of scientific knowledge alike owe much to the idea that the world is composed of individuals...awaiting or inviting representation. The idea that beings exist as individuals with inherent attributes, anterior to their representation, is a metaphysical presupposition that underlies the belief in political,

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linguistic, and epistemological forms of representationalism [...] there are assumed to be two distinct and independent kinds of entities – representations and entities to be represented.

Barad questions the commonsensical nature of this representational gap in Western culture, albeit without connecting this with anarchism. The representational gap has a history, she notes, going back to “Democritus’s dream of atoms and the void.” The objects of science and liberal social theories are deemed to be comprised of pre-existing, separable, irreducible units, with representation coming into play when the world is in this way atomised, broken down to discrete bits which are vanishingly small, and therefore imperceptible to humans:

With Democritus’s atomic theory emerges the possibility of a gap between representations and represented – “appearance” makes its first appearance. Is the table a solid mass of wood or an aggregate of discrete entities moving in the void? Atomism poses the question of which representation is real. The problem of realism in philosophy is a product of the atomistic worldview (ibid: 48).

Before highlighting one possible alternative, it’s important to reaffirm Barad’s point that the gap between “words and world” thereby opened up in this move is not dissimilar from the democratic gap that anarchists place under suspicion. This is no mere analogy. The imaginative possibilities unleashed by the atomism of Democritus are just those which find themselves fulfilled in a liberalistic image of social isolates operating in a representative democratic void.

The representational tendency in Western theories of knowledge, which posits that something is true when articulated knowledge maps onto a world “out there,” has similarly long dominated what Pickering calls classical sciences, both natural and social, running from logical positivism and logical empiricism to more recent understandings of the world as “text.” However, anarchism breaks away from the problematic separation of representation, and in this case, its epistemological counterpart, the correspondence theory of truth [1].

While scholars now increasingly question the idea that knowledge is a “possession of the inner nature of things” (Dewey, 1930: 127), anarchists have consistently highlighted that at a fundamental level, representational politicians within the state apparatus cannot adequately understand, adopt and represent the views of those they are commonly, and mistakenly, held to be standing for. As Barad points out, political representationalism doesn’t just neutrally translate and map onto the needs and desires of the atomised subjects it claims to represent, but actively forms those needs and actions in the first place [2].

Replacing Hierarchies of Representation: The Example of Cybernetic Performance

By drawing on the philosophy-physics of quantum physicist Niels Bohr, Barad rejects the atomistic metaphysics underpinning the original jump to representation, made possible by the vision of Democritus, and builds a strong case for discarding extremely ancient ontological assumptions of discrete things with inherently determinate boundaries or properties, in need of representation [3]. Instead, she expands on Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, a scholar with uncoincidental anarchist sympathies (Heckert, 2011), and closes the word-world gap by asserting that the world comes into being through iterative everyday performance. Butler’s hallmark example posits that gender and other previously unquestioned social identities are established through enactment, importantly shifting discussions of epistemology (do our descriptions mirror nature or culture?) “to matters of practices/doings/actions” (Barad, 2003: 802).

The loop between performative social theory and anarchism can be closed here, by drawing on the non-hierarchical, domination-eschewing and co-operative vision formulated by Andrew Pickering (2010), and which, alongside Butler, he names “the performative idiom.” According to Pickering (ibid), by discarding representation and adopting an ontological vision of the world as non-purified and complex dance of agency, one can advance a “new ontology.” This ontology is one of an exceedingly-complex, ever-evolving world of becoming, constantly overflowing and inappropriately comprehended by the static metaphysics of the “representational idiom” (Pickering, 1994)[4]. He (Pickering, 2010: 31) argues that the representational and dualistic social scientific research undertaken throughout the twentieth century constrained the creative and liberatory powers of performative knowledge-in-being. It was an

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attempt to “grasp the inner workings of the world through knowledge and thus to dominate it and put it entirely at our disposal” (ibid).

Pickering turns to the British movement of cybernetics, a trans-disciplinary, trans-Atlantic movement which aimed to study regulation, control and communication in both living and non-living complex systems. Although not touching on anarchism explicitly, his study on cybernetics works as a concrete example of the performative idiom. A movement of *anticontrol*, as he terms it, was staging an ontology in which dynamic systems mutually accommodate and adapt in unpredictable ways, thoroughly evading the representational idiom which would try to map processes from initial conditions, an ultimately futile project in a world of inherent unpredictability and flux.

This loose gathering of experimentalists are particularly famous for experiments with adaptive robots[5] and homeostats, which displayed complex, emergent behaviours and importantly, without the need for representational programming and mapping of their environment. Other examples of these experiments also hold valuable lessons for the liberatory project of anarchism in the social sciences. Pickering’s examination of the British cybernetics movement provides further insight, for example, into R.D. Laing’s non-hierarchical experiments in residential psychiatry, the Anti-University and critiques of transmissive models of education which prop up “a modern ontology of knowability, controllability, enframability” (ibid: 401), the radical institutions and consciousness shifts of the sixties, and the cybernetic design of the socialist economy (admittedly not a libertarian socialist or anarchist one) in Allende’s Chile prior to the 1973 coup.

Gregory Bateson, a second-generation cyberneticist, while somewhat equivocal on the possibilities of decentralised governance (see Duda, 2013), also eschews dualistic and domination-based models of the world. He rightly observes that “we do not live in the sort of universe in which simple lineal control is possible,” “[l]ife is not like that” (in Pickering, 2010: 179). Indeed, the atomistic billiard-ball models of causality which characterise the Democritean, and eventually Newtonian, underpinnings of representation simply do not translate to the complex world described by Bateson and the other cyberneticists. For Bateson (1973: 268):

I think that the functioning of such hierarchies may be compared with the business of trying to back a truck to which one or more trailers are attached. Each segmentation of such a system denotes a reversal of sign, and each added segment denotes a drastic decrease in the amount of control...When we consider the problem of controlling a second trailer, the threshold for jackknifing is drastically reduced, and control becomes, therefore, almost negligible. As I see it, the world is made up of a very complex network (rather than a chain) of such entities which have this sort of relation to each other, but with this difference, that many of the entities have their own supplies of energy and perhaps even their own ideas of where they would like to go.

Top-down hierarchical administrations are, following this cybernetic line of thought, going to run into the asymmetry of having to control a much larger variety of factors than it is capable of even comprehending[6]. Hence, at least in part, we are left with the extreme ecological and social ‘externalities’ of contemporary capitalism. To take Bateson seriously is to point towards the anarchist case that alternative modes of acting in the world, locally-rooted, spatially-distributed ones which can accommodate and account for the performance of complexity, may be not just more democratic, but simply more effective. As the famous anarchist refrain goes, anything the state does, we can do better. Adaptive self-management and decentralisation are posited therefore as the most appropriate ways of managing complex systems, through decentralized and feedback-rich relationships that unite people, as Duda (2013: 63) puts it, “in a way that looks less like a party or state and more like a brain or neural network.”

Through multifarious performative experiments on open-ended systems, Pickering demonstrates that the cyberneticists entirely reworked the imaginative model which grounds Western thought. Instead, they constructed relatively simple systems which displayed bottom-up complex behavior, successfully operating in the world with little or no need for representation. *This* is the sketch of another future which Pickering refers to in his title, and which I propose lends intriguing support to the anarchist project. While the British cybernetics movement remained socially and institutionally marginalized, much like anarchism, this article has sought to highlight why the time may be ripe for anarchism to be viewed with more relevance, particularly in a post-representational social scientific milieu.

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Notes

[1] The general theory that truth consists by adequately mapping onto, or corresponding with, reality.

[2] Barad (2007: 47) here draws on Butler's statement, who in turn refers to Foucault, that "juridical notions of power appear to regulate political life in purely negative terms...But the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures."

[3] It's worth noting that related work in this vein by international relations scholar, Alexander Wendt (2015), contrasts quantum-informed social ontology to mainstream atomistic theorizing in the liberal tradition, which assumes a "world of separable, constitutionally pre-social individuals who then struggle to achieve sociality (the state of nature and all that)," Wendt notes that "quantum phenomena are marked by their holistic and "cooperative" character". Instead of atoms in a void we instead get a relational onto-epistemology of radical entanglement and interconnectedness, a vision which, I propose, lends itself best to an anarchist social theory.

[4] As Dewey (1930:123) puts it "[w]ith the surrender of unchangeable substances having properties fixed in isolation and unaffected by interactions, must go the notion that certainty is attained by attachment to fixed objects with fixed characters."

[5] Grey Walter's tortoises perhaps catches the public imagination the most, even appearing in a BBC TV special entitled *Bristol's Robot Tortoises Have Minds of their Own*. Indeed, Walter, a prominent cybernetician in Pickering's *The Cybernetic Brain*, aside from being the father of the famed British anarchist Nicholas Walter, himself contributed an essay titled 'The Development and Significance of Cybernetics' to the anarchist journal *Freedom* (Duda, 2013).

[6] For more on this, see Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety (Ashby, 2011).

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