

Solarpunk as Anarchist Infrapolitics

Social transformation never happens through economic or legal changes alone. Those changes are always accompanied by alterations in the more informally transformative spheres of culture and ideology, shaping the nuts and bolts of how people think and act. Anarchists have always acknowledged this. Indeed, if there's one thing anarchists are known for among the general public, it's having a leg in several artistic, musical, and philosophical subcultures. This goes way back. Kropotkin and Goldman weren't just exquisite theorists of class struggle and anarchisation, they also wrote entire books on Russian literature and modern theatre respectively.

However, I've noticed a tragic tendency as of late (i.e. the last couple of decades) to view anarchist activity in the cultural and ideological fronts as separate and apart from activity on the political and economic fronts. At worst, I've seen some involved in the latter dismiss most of those involved in the former as "apolitical" or as mere "lifestylists", holding themselves up as exemplars of "real" anarchist action – which, from what I can see, seems to consist of writing articles for newspapers no one reads and occasionally waving a few red-and-black flags around at strikes and protests. If that's what "real" political activity looks like, it doesn't do much in terms of accomplishing libertarian political goals.

To be fair, such Libcom types aren't wrong when they claim that so much of cultural anarchism is rife with people who have no commitment to social struggle or system change, viewing anarchy as a mere means of personal rebellion and self-expression. That's always been a problem. The bohemians, the hippies, the punks, and the techies have thus far given us lots of nice artworks, though they've failed to deliver the dissolution of the state and worker self-management of the economy.

But given that the prophesied proletarian revolution of the workerist anarchists is a good century or more overdue, one could say the achievements of cultural anarchism and class struggle anarchism – when considered as separate entities – are about equal. They've delivered many small and cumulative victories as part of larger movements (e.g. in arts, education, civil liberties, and workers' campaigns), but the long-term ideal of social anarchy remains as far off beyond the horizon as ever.

One of the main sources of this relative distrust between those involved in cultural-ideological struggle and those involved in political-economic struggle – and perhaps the absence of more significant gains we might get from better cooperation between the two fronts – lies, I believe, in the lack of an adequate means of conceptualising how they interrelate. On this issue, and despite the dismissals of much cultural-ideological activity as apolitical, I'd like to propose that both forms of activity are political, but political in different ways. One is *infrapolitical* ("infra-" meaning

underneath), while the other is *megapolitical* (“mega-” meaning grand or overarching).

By infrapolitics, I mean the forms of cultural and ideological action people engage in which aren’t formally political, but nevertheless form the basis of social-political reality at both the interpersonal and systemic levels of society, as they shape the way we conceive of, relate to, and interact with the social reality. Things like making art, creating counter-cultural scenes, injecting political ideas into various cultural milieus, philosophising, and creating alternative forms of education.

By megapolitics, I mean most of what’s considered “political” in the traditional sense: trying to effect change in the functioning of the social system as a whole, in particular its governance and jurisprudence with regard to the people. Things like municipalism, syndicalism, and activism in the most familiar sense.

Infrapolitics should always be of interest to anarchist activism because it’s in infrapolitical spaces that the seeds of practical (megapolitival) change are sewed within the social imaginary. We can cultivate the values of individual autonomy, voluntary cooperation, and anti-hierarchical organising in popular consciousness and behaviour through means which aren’t recognised as “political” in the formal sense, but nonetheless have demonstrable effects on how people act in formal political contexts.

Which brings me to what I’d like highlight as one of the most promising potential infrapolitical spaces social anarchists would be wise to explore and become active in: a subculture called solarpunk.

Born in the early 2010s online, and picking up momentum around the middle of the decade, it’s a form of ecological futurism which has found expression in science-fiction, drawings and crafts, and now, to a growing extent, in radical utopian politics. You may be familiar with the more famous suffixed -punk subcultures of cyberpunk and steampunk, and solarpunk is, in a way, a natural synthesis of the lessons gleaned from both.

Cyberpunk imagines a future gone wrong, taking as its premise the evolution of current society and technology down a dark path, full of pollution, corporate domination, and killer robots. Steampunk imagines a past gone right, taking as its premise the evolution of Victorian society and technology down a bright path, full of adventure, anti-imperialism, and sky pirates. Finally, solarpunk takes the same reimagining approach as steampunk, attempting to demonstrate a set of “what if?” scenarios and bright alternative paths society and technology could take – instead of the industrialist and imperialist wreck we got at the tail end of the 1800s – but like cyberpunk, it focuses on a theoretical future instead of the past.

Looking at our contemporary circumstances, what seems most probable, given the expected course of social and technical development, is something closer to the depressing gloom of a cyberpunk future. Maybe not as bad as *Blade Runner* or a William Gibson novel, though still not something to look forward to. But what if the possibilities are more open and mutable than that? What if we still had the option to choose something brighter and steer the course of socio-technical development toward it? For solarpunk, the historical path not taken is one that’s available to us right now.

Solarpunk imagines a future gone right, taking as its premise the evolution of society and technology down a bright path, full of green tech, nonhierarchical cultures, and gorgeous art nouveau architecture (that last one is subjective, but I thought I'd throw it in there). Automation of toil is widespread, 3D-printing and micro-manufacturing replaces alienating mass production, and labour as a practice is artisan-ised, emulating William Morris's dream of work being made into play. It's a world of decentralised and confederated eco-communities, using technology for human-centric and eco-centric ends rather than for accumulating power and profit – mending the metabolic rift between first nature (the natural world) and second nature (human culture) – and where social hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and disability are considered horror stories from the past “oil age”.

Solarpunk is futurist, but it's a futurism of a rooted and practical kind. It finds its visions of alternative life-verses on technologies, customs, and modes of being which already exist in the present, drawing out what's liberatory and ecological right now and moving it from the circumference of the world's ordering to its centre. It's remarkably similar to the method of social anarchism: educing the liberatory within the already-existing.

As of right now, solarpunk is a pretty small scene. For the most part, interest in it is confined to a small few Facebook groups, Tumblr and WordPress blogs, Pinterest folders, and a handful of tech hobbyists. In arts and fiction, it's had a smattering of comics and short story collections, such as last year's anthology Sunvault, most of which explore fictional eco-utopias.

What should make it of interest to anarchists is how similar the underlying values of solarpunk are to those of social anarchism, in particular to the post-scarcity anarchism of Murray Bookchin: decentralism, the blending of the ecological with the technological, the fusion of the functional with the ornamental, local autonomy, participatory decision-making, and unity-in-diversity. Almost by accident, solarpunks ended up coming to most of the same conclusions as anarchists by means of art. Aesthetically, it's a celebration of egalitarianism on the basis of freedom, of which political anarchism is the natural complement.

So while it's small at the moment, both anarchists and solarpunks could have much to gain from collaborating and from getting immersed in each other's worlds. For anarchists, solarpunk could become a fecund playground for elaborating upon libertarian ideas and practices through the mediums of aesthetics and fiction. For solarpunks, the visions of free and ecological societies glimpsed at through its eco-utopias and experiments in eco-technology can act as a gateway to Kropotkinian theories of how to remake the culture, economy, and polity on freer and ecological lines.

Social anarchism of course is no stranger to the worlds of arts and (sub)culture. Though for the most part this has been in the form of individual anarchists using a given medium or work to explore anarchistic ideas at the level of personal liberation. What's rarer is using culture as a whole to grow libertarian consciousness on a mass scale. That is what we need to try to do more of in the future, and that's what solarpunk may have the potential to catalyse.

We need artworks which instil a consciously anti-authoritarian way of looking at the world, and a libertarian ethos of autonomy, mutual aid, and ecological interrelationism. Solarpunk is one of the

best available cultural hotbeds for generating artworks of those kinds. Its unique format of eco-speculation gives artists the freedom to imagine wild and alternative ways of ordering the world, but with enough of a connection to the nitty-gritty reality of the conditions we now exist in to draw a practical trajectory from what we're stuck with now to what we want to create. To quote social anarchist aesthetic theorist Jesse Cohn, it draws out "the ideal from within the real", actualising what's already there in potential.

There's no way to tell how long solarpunk will remain popular, or if it'll ever take off and become more than a small group of eco-geeks online. But given its obvious richness as a site for anarchist infrapolitics, it's well worth trying to make that happen.

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