



# Impossible organisations: Anarchism and organisational praxis

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## abstract

Organisational scholarship tends to focus its attention mainly on conventional work organisations and so neglects the organisational practices and principles of other sites of organising. The paper considers the implications of this limited focus even within more critical scholarship through a close reading of a recent paper calling for a greater engagement with social movements. Specifically, I consider problems of understanding a phenomenon in terms of what it is not and evaluating alternative sites of organisation using conventional categories of analysis. I then go on to outline the potential contribution of anarchist theory and its enactment by recent anti-capitalist movements. These radically different approaches to organisation are evaluated and I argue that they present a profound challenge to mainstream assumptions. The paper concludes that critical organisational theory has much to learn from an engagement with such alternative sites of organisation but only if a determined attempt is made to move beyond the usual theoretical frameworks and that anarchist theory may help us do this.

## Introduction

Anarchist approaches to organisation, both in theory and practice, are relatively neglected in organisational scholarship, including within more radical work. In this paper I consider why this is and what might be gained from paying more attention to them. As far as more mainstream work is concerned, it is plausible that, as March (2007) and others argue, the location of organisation studies within business schools encourages a focus on the firm and management practitioners. This focus leads to a neglect of other sites of organisation and gives rise to a dominant ‘myth of organisation studies’ (March, 2007: 10) as having a

self-evident disciplinary identity. This myth conceals the discipline's hybrid origins, shameless borrowings and wholesale omissions (Parker, 2002b). O'Doherty, et al. (2013) argue that organisation studies relies on a concept of organisation that is 'distilled from the practitioner language of business and management' (*ibid.*: 1432). They call for a greater awareness that organisation is happening in 'the blind spots and aporias of our discipline' (*ibid.*: 1440). Such arguments plausibly explain why scholarship oriented to the mainstream concerns of business schools should pay little attention to alternative ways of thinking about organising. They do not, however, explain the relative neglect of 'actually existing' alternatives by more critical scholars.

This not to say that critical scholarship has simply ignored these alternatives. In recent years there has been growing interest in them (see Fournier 2006; Parker, et al. 2014: for example; Parker, et al. 2007; Reedy and Learmonth, 2009). Others have suggested that engagement with the practices of new social movements provides a route to an enlarged vision of organising (see Spicer and Böhm, 2007; Willmott, 2008; Zald and Lounsbury, 2010, for example). In both cases it is hoped to encourage organisation scholars 'to abandon their pre-occupation with struggles occurring in the workplace and also consider the multiple resistances against managerial discourses taking place in the wider realms of civil society' (Spicer and Böhm, 2007: 1691). However, as I argue below, even this more critical work has a tendency to reproduce an abstracted view of these non-managerial sites of organisation rather than engaging with the quotidian practices that actually constitute such organising and the subjectivity of participants. As Wachaus (2011) suggests, there are problems with conceptualising alternative sites of organisation with respect to conventional ones, i.e. they are defined by what they are not. There is thus a real danger that this limited view both misses what is distinctive about alternative ways of understanding organisation and that it leads to 'the dispossession of agency' (Featherstone, 2008: 5). Indeed, the way Spicer and Böhm (2007) characterise such alternatives as instances of resistance to managerialism rather than something in and of themselves exemplifies this problem. The discursive hegemony of managerialism may even contribute to what Krinsky (2007) has argued is the organisational de-skilling and passivity of oppositional movements when faced with an insistence on the need for managerial 'skills' or other conventional organisational elements.

Consequently, this paper argues that it is not enough to call for more attention to be paid to alternative conceptions of organisation. Rather what is required are new ways of making sense of such alternatives and then using these insights to reflect back upon our assumptions regarding organisation more generally. Without such a theoretical re-framing we are in danger of unwittingly

reproducing aspects of managerialism that, as others have noted, derive from and support the dominance of neoliberal imperatives of hierarchy, control and economic instrumentality (Harvey, 1989; 2005; Johnson, 2006; Parker, 2002a). Instead we require ‘a sustained effort to shatter the “common sense” spell of neoliberal governmentality’ (Springer, 2012: 1618) and to learn from those who have mastered ‘the art of not being governed’ (*ibid.*: 1617). In doing this we may escape the trap of abstracting ‘organising from the world’ and instead ‘use our conceptual and practical tools to engage the world fully’ (Cheney et al. 2012: 67). This not only requires that we inform ourselves of everyday alternative organising practices but also that we attempt a theoretical refiguring of organising that does not rely on managerial categories of analysis. It is anarchist organisational thinking that may serve this purpose. Such theory potentially enables us to escape from the usual emphasis in organisation studies on structure – that an organisation is a *place* where people get organised (usually by managers). Rather it sees organisation as a set of fluid processes whereby needs and desires are cooperatively formulated and met (Cumbers et al. 2008; Kinna, 2005). The paper encourages a more expansive view of organisation that views it as a universal cooperative human achievement undertaken for a variety of ends and achieved through a rich multiplicity of means. The paper thus forms part of a wider project to theoretically legitimise non-managerial ways of understanding and performing organisation.

The paper is organised in the following way. I begin with a critical reading of Ahrne and Brunsson’s (2011) recent paper in *Organization*. I have chosen this paper not because it is a bad paper but, on the contrary, because it represents a rather well-formulated call to enlarge the scope of organisation scholarship by including a wider range of sites of organising. However, my contention is that in doing so it reproduces the centrality of mainstream notions of organisation in ways that limit our ability to see what is really distinctive about them. I go on to contrast this limited view of organisation with one derived from anarchist thought and related organisational practices within new social movements influenced by the anarchist tradition. Because of the relative absence of organisational studies research into such everyday practices (though see Imas and Weston (2012); Imas et al., (2012) for two noteworthy recent exceptions), I turn to the broader social sciences. Here, the everyday organising of recent anti-capitalist movements receives much more attention (see Broad, 2002; Fominaya, 2010; Jasper, 2010; Maeckelbergh, 2012; Moore and Roberts, 2009; Murray, 2010; Pickard, 2006; Saunders, 2008). In particular there has been a resurgence of interest in anarchism and social movement organising in the work of critical social and political geographers (see Chatterton, 2010; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Cumbers et al., 2008; Davies, 2012; Featherstone, 2008; Routledge, 1996;

Springer, 2012). In the concluding section I return to the significance of anarchist views of organisation for critical organisation theory.

## **Organisations, networks and social movements**

Ahrne and Brunsson begin their article 'Organisation outside organisations' by asking 'is organisation becoming obsolete?' (2011: 83; all further page references without author and/or date are to this article) given the growing dominance of the concepts of 'institution' and 'network' within the social sciences. They conclude that it is not but that organisation studies should widen its scope from its traditional focus on 'organisations rather than organisation' (84). These are arguments that accord with the calls I cite above and with my own conviction that we require a more expansive conception of organisation within our discipline in order to engage more fully with the broader social and political contexts within which organisation takes place (Zald and Lounsbury, 2010). The way in which they develop this intention is primarily designed to bring a conceptual and analytical clarity to the category of organisation and its relation to institution and network. In this respect the paper is a model of its kind, but it also struck me as illustrating how easy it is for even more critical scholars to categorise alternative organisation according conventional frameworks and so reduce their disruptive potential. It is arguably symptomatic of a broader tendency to 'managerialise' non-managerial domains of organisation (see Ahrne, 1996; Herriot and Scott-Jackson, 2002; O'Mahony and Bechky, 2008, for further examples).

To illustrate this tendency, Ahrne and Brunsson begin by claiming that an imperative of conceptual clarity requires that we initially define organisation as traditional formal organisation which they term a 'complete' (84) organisation. To qualify as a complete organisation the following are required: 'decision-makers who make decisions about and on behalf of other organisation members' (85); 'membership' – a formal contractual relation that goes beyond affiliation (86); 'hierarchy, a right to oblige others to comply with central decisions' (86); the ability to 'issue commands' and 'decide upon rules that its members are expected to follow' (86); 'the right to monitor compliance' as well as 'the right to decide about sanctions' (86). They then identify organisation more widely with these qualifications: 'we define organisation as a decided order in which people use elements that are constitutive of formal organisations' (85).

Other forms of organising are then defined as 'partial organisation' to describe the kind of alternative organising that is found in new social movements. Non-hierarchical forms of organisation are thus defined by a lack of ability to qualify as complete. For example, partial organisations result from a lack of 'opportunity

to or interest in building a complete formal organisation' (87). As is commonly the case (Castells, 2004; Cumbers, et al. 2008; Routledge, 1996), the paper categorises new social movements characteristic of the anti-capitalist mobilizations of recent years as networks, i.e. informal, non-hierarchical associations of individuals and groups bound together by personal relationships. However, it is made quite clear that these do not qualify as organisations because they are 'emergent social orders, which merely happen rather than being decided' (90). 'Genuine networks' are 'completely lacking in organisational elements' (99) and so lack the capacity to be decided upon or 'to create a specific order' (90). This lack of decision-making ability is crucial for Ahrne and Brunsson, because such a capacity 'is perhaps, the most effective way of assuming responsibility available to us' (91) but in networks 'everyone or no one is responsible' (92). The solution for such networks to operate effectively and justly is to have recourse to one or more of the characteristics of the complete organisation, particularly hierarchy.

My contention is that we are seeing an instance of how 'networks have been conceptualized using the tools of hierarchies' thus limiting 'our conception of that thing to what it is not' (Wachhaus, 2012: 34). Rather than making such comparisons using language developed for the theorisation of the conventional, what is required is a theoretical framework for treating such alternatives as a distinctive thing in and of itself. As it is we are left with a paradox. We have entities that manifestly organise (see Brown and Hosking, 1986; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Davies, 2012; Haug, 2013, for some accounts of such organising) but that we may not call organisations. They are then definitionally *impossible organisations* and relegated to the margins of organisational studies. Indeed, most critical organisational theory restricts itself to the chronicling of work organisations as sites of domination, oppression or resistance (Parker, 2002a; Reedy, 2008). Only rarely does our discipline pay attention to the much broader historical tradition of everyday organising undertaken cooperatively in an almost infinite variety of social settings and places. It is here that anarchist approaches to organisation may make a contribution to the reframing of both what organisation *is* and what it is *for*. A starting point for discussing this claim is that most anarchists would fundamentally oppose all of Ahrne and Brunsson's organisational characteristics as oppressive and unnecessary for organisation and decision-making to take place (Graeber, 2002; Kinna, 2005; Marshall, 1993; Woodcock, 1963). In addition they would insist that a model of organisation that separates the means (a particular form or set of rules for organisation) from the ends (the purpose and outcomes of what the organisation does) is fundamentally at odds with human flourishing (Ward, 1973).

## **Anarchism and organisation**

In this paper I am mainly interested in anarchist thinking on organisation as it relates to the practices of various groupings and movements against neo-liberal capitalism, commonly though not always referred to as the anti-capitalist movement (Bieler, 2011), a term preferred by most activists to the 'anti-globalisation' terminology of most news reporting (Graeber, 2002). Alternatively some prefer terms such as 'alterglobalization' (Maeckelbergh, 2012) or 'global justice network' (Cumbers, et al. 2008) to emphasise a positive rather than negative political project. Due to the diversity and fragmentation of these movements it is difficult to precisely bound them but my comments apply mostly to those movements and groups in Europe and the US that came to public attention following large scale protest at the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999 and that re-emerged into the limelight with the Occupy movement in 2008-9. However, such manifestations are merely the more visible aspects of movements that both have a considerable historical continuity with the counter-culture and new left of the 1960s (Maeckelbergh, 2011) and a plethora of less visible local forms of protest, opposition and alternative lifestyle. Where I draw on specific movements, events and groups I indicate these in the text. The common thread that links these disparate movements and groups can arguably be claimed to be an affinity with anarchist thought and practice (Graeber, 2002; Marshall, 1993) and so it is useful to begin this discussion with a brief overview of the relevant aspects of anarchism before looking at the specific practices of these movements. The first thing to note is that some might regard it as more accurate to talk about 'anarchisms' rather than anarchism (Kinna, 2005). By its very nature, there has never been the same drive for ideological unity that has sometimes characterised Marxism and a diversity of thinking has flourished as a result (Marshall, 1993; Woodcock, 1963). Most expositions on anarchism begin with the single defining characteristic of rejection of imposed authority, particularly that of the state. For example, Marshall asserts that

All anarchists reject the legitimacy of external government and of the State, and condemn imposed political authority, hierarchy and domination. They seek to establish the condition of anarchy, that is to say, a decentralized and self-regulating society consisting of a federation of voluntary associations of free and equal individuals. The ultimate goal of anarchism is to create a free society which allows all human beings to realize their full potential. (1993: 3)

By extension, many anarchists tend to be highly suspicious of any form of regulative authority, including representative voting systems that may give rise to the tyranny of the majority. This rejection dates from William Godwin's insistence that no-one may represent the interests of another (Marshall, 1986).

Freedom, frequently characterised as the autonomy of the individual to determine their own affairs according to their own reason (Kinna, 2005), is a central ideal of most anarchist thought but has also given rise to one of the persistent areas of difference within the tradition. The debate is often framed as a dichotomy between Kropotkin's communistic anarchism (1970a; 1970b) and the individualistic anarchism of Stirner (2006). Discussion thus centres on the relationship between the individual and the collective (see Kinna (2005) for a useful account of these) particularly the degree to which individuals should be bound by collective norms and decisions. However, such a simple dichotomy is misleading as most anarchists see community as an essential aspect of a free life for individuals: i.e. freedom is a project we work out with each other. Consequently, much anarchist theory and praxis seeks for a harmonious relation between individual liberty and communal belonging. Even Stirner argued for the necessity of some form of community, a 'union of egotists' (2006). A key principle is that many anarchists believe that any rules worked out within communities are voluntarily accepted or rejected and all have a voice in their formation. This must also be seen in the light of widespread anarchist belief in the emergence of a natural rationality and harmony once the distorting effects of hierarchy and authority are removed (Marshall, 1993). More recently, some anarchist theory has turned to post-structuralism (May, 1994) in order to refine the understanding of power and domination within social groups more fully, a theoretical turn sometimes referred to as 'post-anarchism' (Springer, 2012: 1610).

It may therefore be argued that anarchist theory and practice has engaged with the problems of extending individual agency whilst sustaining communities and organisation more than is commonly the case within organisation studies. This is not to say, as Marshall (1993) points out, that anarchism provides universal solutions to the various difficulties of trying to reconcile community and autonomy. Problems such as the oppressive potential of social censure or the withdrawal of community membership are discussed widely and never fully resolved. It can be argued, however, that this is a strength of anarchist theory and practice. The lack of prescriptive norms or institutional forms means that organisation is always debatable and changeable and can be constantly renegotiated. Organisation within an ideal anarchist community is essentially comprised of dynamic, negotiated fluid processes. Additionally, it is this alertness to the tension between autonomy and the need for collective organisation that has driven a number of organisational innovations that are exemplified by many anti-capitalist social movements and that I discuss below.

Recent anti-capitalist movements do seem to exemplify a shift towards a greater emphasis on the primacy of individual autonomy and personal development and

away from more collectivist thinking within anarchist thought (Curran, 2006). Graeber (2002) terms this shift one from big 'A' Anarchism to small 'a' anarchism. This may partially be due to a general societal shift towards individualism but is also a result of the refiguring of anarchism during its 1960s revival (Marshall, 1993). This revival was associated with increasing disillusionment with mass movement party-based vanguardist politics in the aftermath of the failure of 'really existing socialism' in the Soviet Union (Curran, 2006). It is widely asserted that today's anti-capitalist movements are the direct heirs of the 60s counter cultural, liberation and protest movements (Broad, 2002; Maeckelbergh, 2011; McDonald, 2006; Snow et al., 2004). Certainly the idea that the personal is political is central to contemporary anarchistic social movements prompting some social movement scholars to describe the overriding form of activism within them as being that of 'personalism' (Clemens and Minkoff, 2004).

Prefigurative politics is another distinctive aspect of the anarchist tradition that has been a powerful influence on anti-capitalist movement (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Kinna, 2005; Maeckelbergh, 2012; Robinson and Tormey, 2012). Anarchism, despite its contributions to the utopian imaginary (Reedy, 2002), and unlike Marxism, has not been associated with a teleological unfolding whereby one historical era is a prerequisite for the emergence of another. Rather it is characterised by a degree of 'primitivism' (Marshall 1993), i.e. anarchism pre-existed political authority and is a 'natural' way of conducting human affairs. It is thus always immanent in existing social arrangements bubbling under the surface and waiting to re-emerge under the right conditions. As a result, rather than postponing new social and organisational arrangements into the future, the anarchist utopian imagination is harnessed to constant communitarian and organisational innovation and experimentation in the here and now (Reedy, 2002; Woodcock, 1963). The refusal to separate ends and means (Ward, 1973) reinforces this desire that everyday organising practices in themselves enact and realise the ideals of communal harmony and individual autonomy. This prefigurative perspective provides a rich source of alternatives to the contemporary managed formal organisation which appears as historically and culturally contingent. Thus the marginal-central relation between alternative and managerial organisation is reversed according to the long historical anarchist perspective. This brings into question Ahrne and Brunsson's contention that it is the managerial conception of organisation that should be the norm by which other forms of organising are judged. As a result of this experimentation, the anti-capitalist movements, heavily influenced as they are by anarchism, provide fertile ground for examining new ways of organising that do not rely on the assumed necessity of formality, hierarchy, rules, authority and punishment; it is to these I now turn.



## Anarchist organisation and new social movements

Various studies of anti-capitalist movements observe the centrality of the anarchist principles outlined above (see Bieler, 2011; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; McDonald, 2006; Pickard, 2006, for examples). This is despite the fact that many participants are reluctant to define themselves solely in terms of a political identity such as ‘anarchist’ (Chatterton, 2010), a consequence of the decline in mass movement big ‘A’ Anarchism noted by Graeber (2002) which I discuss above. There are, of course, other political philosophies apparent within these movements, most notably autonomism (Gautney, 2009) or other philosophies that descend from the Marxist and Trotskyist traditions (Bircham and Charlton, 2001; Ibrahim, 2011). It is also worth noting that green political thought has its own distinctive influence and that environmentalism of various kinds is a widespread feature of the anti-capitalist movement (Curran, 2006; Dobson, 2000). However, there has been a considerable convergence between these political traditions in terms of their organisational practices (Gautney, 2009) despite some continuing tensions (Ibrahim, 2011). I do not wish to get too bogged down in a lengthy detour of these distinctions here particularly, as it can reasonably be claimed that ‘anarchism is the heart of the movement, its soul; the source of most of what’s new and hopeful about it’ (Graeber, 2002: 16). One may therefore consider the anti-capitalist movement a kind of laboratory for anarchist organisational practice, one that has been given an additional impetus by the financial collapse. With the growing inability of previously prosperous nations to provide paid employment to large swathes of young people entering the labour market (European Commission, 2013), participation in Ahrne and Brunsson’s complete organisations is far from the universal experience it might have been considered fifty years ago. Instead groups such as the *Indignadas* in Catalonia (Conill et al., 2012) or the *Centri Sociali* across Italy (McDonald, 2006; Ruggiero, 2000) have relied on anarchist models of mutual aid and community self-help as well as anarchist organisational principles to satisfy basic material and social needs, a trend apparent throughout those regions hit hardest by the crisis (Castells, 2012; Castells et al., 2012).

Other studies of anti-capitalist movements reveal further affinities with anarchism, particularly its insistence on the preservation of individual autonomy even when pursuing large scale collective action. A useful summary of this is given by Murray’s reflections on the G20 protests in Pittsburgh in 2009: ‘the central challenge for theorists and practitioners of radical politics today is to develop forces of action and organisation that account for the specificity of diverse local struggles and promote the free transformation of individual and collective subjectivities through political action, but also provide the means for collective action on a global scale’ (2010: 462). Murray goes on to identify three

basic modes of anarchist organisational practice evident in the anti-capitalist movements relating to deliberation, decision and action (2010: 462). These combine systemically in order to produce the underlying social structure of collective life – the common, a shared set of affinities, purposes, procedures, convivialities and spaces. The first of these modes is characterised by free speech without a goal and is ‘a process in which each strives to recognise the merit in another’s argument (2010: 463). This is not simply aimless discussion but neither does it seek to enforce a consensus or majority view. Rather, by striving to understand the preferences and viewpoint of the other, subjectivities are changed, solidarities forged and the common is produced, these deliberative practices are to be commonly found in the social forums that are a characteristic of the anti-capitalist movement. (Sen et al. 2003)

Decision-making stands in close relation to deliberation, as it would be difficult to envisage such decision-making as democratic unless preceded by deliberation. The key distinction between deliberation and decision is that the latter requires consensus. This is a very different organisational principle from the authority based decision-making of Ahrne and Brunsson’s conception of organisation or even the majoritarian democratic decision-making of Trade Unions or other representative political institutions. An arduous process of reaching complete consensus is required in which all are expected to participate, all present must give their final approval for a decision and, by extension, participants have the ability to block a decision being made. Such decision-making requires a high level of interpersonal skill in arriving at decisions without recourse to hierarchy or the un-emotive calculative ideal of managerial decision-making (Brown and Hosking, 1986). Leadership, although regarded with caution because of its managerial and hierarchical connotations, may nevertheless emerge in attempts to make decisions. This is not leadership as a prerogative of a managerial elite, but rather takes the form of ‘influential contributions to order... achieved through the exercise of skill’ (Brown and Hosking, 1986: 76). Even here there is often discussion of the potential inequalities arising from the differing capacity of individuals to make such contributions.

Maeckelbergh (2012) gives an illuminating account of this consensus decision-making in her analysis of the European Occupy movement, particularly as observed in Barcelona in May 2011. She uses the term ‘horizontal’ democracy to denote the particular form of deliberative decision-making evident in these occupations. Specifically, horizontalism ‘refers to the active creation of non-hierarchical relations through decision-making processes’ (Maeckelbergh, 2011: 211). This involves constant movement between small group meetings (based on neighbourhood affiliation) and a larger assembly. The innovation of hand signals in the large assembly to enable large numbers to signal agreement or

disagreement is also described: a widespread technique across other Occupy sites.

The arduousness and difficulties that accompany consensus decision-making (Maeckelbergh 2011) have led some to argue that the price of freedom is the endless meeting (Polletta, 2002). However, two factors militate against paralysis. Firstly, the result of consensus not being reached in a group is likely to stimulate further work on reaching a more acceptable decision. It may sometimes result in the formation of new groups in which consensus is achievable. In addition, affinity groups (McDonald, 2006) are predisposed to consensus as they are formed out of 'a shared desire to accomplish a specific task' (Murray, 2010: 477). There is also no reason why such groups should endure beyond their original purpose unless members choose to make it so. Using permanence and institutionalisation as criteria for judging organisational success reflects the kind of conventional thinking about organisation that I seek to escape in this paper. Unlike the unitarist assumptions underlying much organisational theory, conflict and disagreement are more likely to be seen as legitimate and essential aspects of anarchist organisation, a rejection of the principle of 'univocicity' (Maeckelbergh, 2012: 225) exemplified by Ahrne and Brunsson's complete organisation. The acceptance of such conflict also enables challenges to the various forms of domination and authority that tend to re-emerge without constant vigilance.

The enactment of deliberative democracy at a large scale challenges the assumption that more complex organisation requires features such as permanent hierarchical structures. The numerous groups that make up the anti-capitalist movement have managed to organise large scale coordinated actions, including recent protests against the G8 and G20 and the Occupy actions. These actions were based upon the bonds and practices developed in smaller groups and assemblies which were then extended via federative networking without recourse to imposed forms of authority (Ahrne, 1996; Castells, 2012; Chatterton, 2010; Haug, 2013). Such networking is often facilitated by the ease of access to information that the internet provides, in itself sometimes hailed as an exemplar of anarchist principles (Marshall, 1993). Certainly movements allied to the anti-capitalist cause have not been slow to take advantage of it, and organisations such as *Indymedia* share the characteristic deliberative democratic structures described above whilst also providing an alternative perspective on world events for anti-capitalists (Pickard, 2006). One can see a striking example of the power of information networks within the anti-capitalist movement in the early influence of the Zapatista movement in the mid-1990s (Kingsnorth, 2004). Despite the seeming obscurity of an uprising of indigenous Mayan peasants in a poor region of Mexico, the use of novel anarchist organisational techniques was globally

disseminated, making this movement a source of inspiration and organisational ideas (Maeckelbergh, 2012).

The typical organisational practices of anti-capitalist movements contrast strongly then with those of the 'complete' organisation. They tend to be

segmentary (composed of many diverse groups, which grow and die, divide and fuse, proliferate and contract); polycentric (having multiple, often temporary, and sometimes competing leaders or centres of influence); networked (forming a loose, reticulate, travelling, overlapping membership, joint activities, common reading matter, and shared ideals and opponents). (Pickard 2006: 320)

They are also held together by 'personal identity relationships' (Pickard, 2006: 320) rather than by hierarchy, authority and other conventional structural elements. These anarchistic organisational features have been argued as enabling the anti-capitalist movement to be flexible and highly adaptive to the changing political landscape. As a result the movement has often been able to build effective coalitions between those with widely divergent interests, backgrounds, levels of involvement and lifestyles to both pursue their own particular chosen form of activism and forms of life at a local level but also to collaborate with sometimes global level action. Such loose networks of overlapping memberships can, therefore, simultaneously coalesce (for political campaigns or joint projects such as festivals), but also fragment as a result of disagreement or new personal ties leading to shifts in affinities (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; McDonald, 2006; Melucci, 1989). Such groups tend to be both intensely local (because they rely on various forms of conviviality to maintain affinity bonds) and engaged in global issues, using information and communication technologies to extend networks to national and international levels (Castells, 2012; Pickard, 2006; Wall, 2007).

The role of personal identity bonds as the basis for organisation and collective identity contrasts strongly with the frequently assumed necessity of leadership, authority, regulation, sanctions and the subordination of individual autonomy in favour of the collective. Some argue that these bonds are forged through a shared lifestyle. Although lifestyle politics may be disparaged as a dilettante pursuit of a shallow self-gratification, they may also be more positively framed as an aspect of the symbolic struggles that accompany the material struggles within new social movements (Bieler, 2011). Saunders (2008), for example, argues that significant subcultural practices reinforce a collective identity derived from 60s counter-cultural norms that enable a shared way of life. McDonald identifies the festival culture as a key site of such lifestyle reproduction and as being the medium by which 60s counter-cultural norms have been passed on to new generations. Festivals constitute 'a cultural laboratory centred on developing new nomadic

lifestyles, an eclectic culture including urban radicals, the rave and drug scene, dance culture, sound systems, festivals, spirituality, squats, vegetarianism, environmentalism, as well as mystical feminism' (McDonald, 2006: 51). Lifestyle may then be considered another way of enacting politics, one in which subjectivity is a core political issue. It exemplifies the sought after harmony within anarchism between individual autonomy and community, where personal experience, embodied actions, personal ties, autonomy, creativity and consensus decision-making are all aimed at both self-production and the realisation of the common (Kinna, 2005).

Others have argued that, although lifestyle is significant it is not sufficient to explain the form and strength of solidarity within anarchist influenced social movements. For one thing participants in large-scale movement actions (such as protests against the G8 or the Iraq War, for example) are much more diverse than the stress on shared lifestyle would suggest. Fominaya (2010) observes that, far from being the hedonistic drop-outs that the stress on lifestyle might suggest, activist lives are frequently characterised by a significant sacrifice of time, energy and income sometimes resulting in frustration and stress as well as economic insecurity and social instability (Chatterton, 2010). Indeed active opposition to neo-fascists or riot police involve risking one's body in sometimes violent conflict. Fominaya (2010) instead argues that collective identity and solidarity is built through participation in assembly and decision-making. A reciprocal identification is produced through commitment to particular causes enabling members to forge bonds of solidarity 'through shared leadership, organisation, ideologies and rituals' (*ibid.*: 380). It is thus the skill and commitment that members bring to participation in the assembly that determines the extent to which a sense of collective identity is achieved. Likewise Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) argue that activists 'attached importance to group sustenance and nurturing capabilities, in effect developing resilience, empathy and coping skills that build community as a bedrock for more oppositional identities and actions' (*ibid.*: 481).

To summarise this section, some distinctive characteristics of anarchist organisational principles and their application within various strands of contemporary anti-capitalist social movements have been identified. These pose a challenge to the usual assumptions regarding the prerequisites for organisation to take place: i.e. that decision-making and an ability to act purposefully upon the world are the preserve of the complete organisation and require hierarchy, stable structure and authority in order to do so. They also challenge the idea that organisations are distinct entities with certain independent attributes in which organising takes place and which can be studied as things in themselves. Rather organisation emerges as a set of processes undertaken by individuals choosing to

engage with each other in pursuit of joint purposes but further that the act and form of organising is constitutive of individual agency and collective action. In short that organising is a form of politics entirely embodied in complex processes of social relations undertaken by various agents. Organisations are thus simultaneously an outcome and a means of individual and collective action.

### **The possibilities of impossible organisation**

In this final section I outline the implications of an anarchist perspective on organisation for a critical organisation studies. The first and most obvious of these is that there are alternatives to the managerial model of organisation both theoretically and on the ground. As I identify above, there is a small if growing interest from some critical scholars in this alternative tradition (Parker et al., 2007), albeit it is often treated in a rather abstracted fashion. There are two areas where this could usefully be extended and that seem necessary to me in order for the possibilities of impossible organising to be realised. The first is the undertaking of more in-depth studies of the quotidian practices of the various sites and groups engaging in prefigurative politics and their accompanying organisational innovations. The second is a sustained and determined attempt to move beyond the usual analytical frameworks that constitute our discipline. If we do not make this attempt then it is all too easy to fall back upon these frameworks and so to miss what is significant about the alternatives we study. To evaluate alternative organising according to the assumption that that the goal of all forms of organisation is to institutionalise: i.e. to compete, to grow, to endure through the imposition of structure and authority by a permanent leadership, to achieve collective instrumental goals that transcend those of individual members and so on is to miss the point. The poststructuralist turn in organisation studies was one such attempt to reframe the theoretical basis of the discipline (Adler et al., 2007; Barratt, 2004; Reedy, 2008; Spicer et al., 2009) and was generative of a large body of intriguing and useful work. It has, however, perhaps been less productive in a more positive theoretical project of proposal and the study of alternative practices. Nevertheless the emergence of post-anarchist theorising (Springer, 2012) suggests that a convergence of anarchist experimentation with these insights could provide a rich seam that critical organisational scholars are well-placed to exploit.

Anarchism also suggests a different set of evaluative criteria for thinking about the everyday practices of alternative organisations. Even the simple but rarely considered idea that organisation should primarily exist in order to meet the material, existential and social needs and desires of its participants creates an evaluative space that moves us beyond the usual consideration of struggle and

resistance in conventional workplaces. We can seek to formulate how we might organise in order to create free spaces for becoming, for exploring possibilities of selfhood usually denied in the characteristically conformist and authoritarian organisations in our contemporary world. Part of the critical theoretical project should then be to argue that the anarchist ideal of radically democratic self-organising should be at the core our concept of organisation rather than being quarantined from it by entirely distinct theoretical categorisations such as ‘partial organisation’ or ‘network’, useful as these might sometimes be.

In this regard, critical organisation scholars could learn a good deal from the work in human geography, sociology and politics that I draw on above. In other words there is already a body of work based on a sustained engagement with the everyday organisational practices of alternative forms of organisation within an anarchist theoretical framework. Not to do this is to miss an opportunity to learn from a potentially far more significant challenge to managerial authority than the various instances of micro-resistance in the workplace so beloved by critical management studies. The survival and flourishing of pockets of anarchistic organisation point to the stubborn survival of an entirely independent but submerged tradition of self-organisation by the marginal and dispossessed with its roots in centuries of struggle that calls into question the necessity and desirability of managers and management (Reedy and Learmonth, 2009). Sadly this rich tradition of non-managerial organising from the ground up, including its contemporary manifestations, rarely figures in the ahistorical pseudo-scientific organisational studies that dominates our discipline. Detailed study of this tradition and its everyday practices is a more positive project than simply cataloguing the various oppressions of corporate organisational life.

As well as invigorating our own critical project there may be ways to support and assist the strivings of movement organisations for new ways of life and a transformative politics. There is little evidence that critical management studies has had much impact on its traditional corporate targets (Parker, 2002a) or that publishing articles in academic journals read by almost no-one is likely to bring about change. My own admittedly limited recent engagements with activists suggest that a large degree of humility on the part of critical academics is in order here. The theoretical and practical expertise of organisation I encountered was substantial and I felt I had a great deal more to learn than to contribute. There may, however, be some possibility for enabling such groups to forge weapons of symbolic resistance in the way that Bourdieu (1998) suggests. Critical management studies has generated an impressive theoretical framework for understanding the subtleties of power and domination in organisational settings that might assist in constructing organisations that are free from the worst effects of these.

We might also start closer to home with the practice of prefigurative politics and begin to think about what the academy would be like if we started to apply anarchist organisational principles to it. The vision of an egalitarian and self-managing community of teachers and learners open to all, free of authority and hierarchy and intent on exploring the history and potential of organisation purely for the pleasure of learning in conviviality is one well worth considering. Rather than occupying our usual stance as disengaged academics studying the struggles of others, what actions ought we to undertake in the here and now? To turn our critique on our own organisation of critical scholarship would be a good start, beginning with an alertness to the reproduction of our limited thinking about organisation within our own scholarly community. Universities free of both state control and of corporate interests would seem to be another kind of impossible organisation but there might already be practices that can prefigure such a transformation in the way we write, teach, learn and resist the encroaching tide of corporate managerialism. The dissenting academies of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were a self-organised solution to the exclusionary and elitist power of the official universities of the time (Parker *et al.*, 2007), perhaps we can begin to create the free universities of the future?

Demanding the impossible is an incurable anarchist habit (Marshall, 1993) and so we as critical organisational scholars should not balk at seemingly impossible organisations but rather seek to consider them seriously in their own terms as challenges to our own understanding and scholarly practice. We should not forget that the daunting monolithic difficulty of change may itself be a chimera. The recent financial collapse, the most recent in a long line of political and economic crises within the neo-liberal order (Harvey, 2005: 2010) suggest that all that is solid may melt into air faster than we expect and when it does, to have alternative arrangements ready to hand, forged in everyday lives at the margins may yet prove to be indispensable.

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