

# The Promise of an Anarchist Sociological Imagination

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You see, I've set my stuff always against various forms of liberalism because those are dominant. But it could just as well — in fact easier for me — be set against Marxism. What these jokers — all of them — don't realize is that **way down deep and systematically, I'm a goddamned anarchist.**

— C. Wright Mills (2000:217–218)

## Introduction

July 23, 2018. Batasan Complex, Quezon City, Philippines. The spectacle of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo staging a political coup d'état to gain the speakership of the Philippine House of Representatives, effectively grabbing the spotlight away from Rodrigo Duterte in his own State of the Nation Address, was just another belated confirmation of what many people have been suspecting for a long time: the Philippine liberal democratic state is dead. The EDSA Republic – that mishmash of elite rule, foreign interventionism, and neoliberal economic (mis)management coated with democratic rhetoric – has been discredited, “pushed over the cliff” (Bello 2017), and now the vultures are feeding on its carcass. Is there a point in reviving it? Even the Christian Messiah promised his miracles of healing and resurrection only to those worth saving.

Outside the Batasan Complex, several groups converged, shouting “Oust Duterte!” to their heart's content. The motley crew of liberals, national democrats, social democrats, self-styled socialists of different shades, and a not-insignificant number of political opportunists were united not just by their opposition to the Duterte administration, but also in their belief that the state is necessary in bringing about the change that they seek. Whether the call is for a regime change (Tindig Pilipinas 2018) or for a bolder systemic revolution (Block Marcos 2018), the state is an essential element of visions of a post-Duterte future. Faith remains that a political institution that has historically been a bastion of hierarchic domination and violence (Gelderloos 2017) could be turned into an instrument to fight against authoritarianism and elite rule. Truly, as Shantz and Williams (2014:2) put it, “the accumulated experiences, histories and mythologies of centuries of nation-state hegemony make it difficult to even imagine anything that suggests alternative means of arranging society.”

The inability (or refusal?) to see the state as the institutional disaster that it is is not just a Philippine affliction but a global one. The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the state gutted and consigned to the sidelines with the diffusion of neoliberal ideas in seats of political power. However, the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen farcical call backs to the strong states of yesteryears, with heads of states threatening trade warfare, imposing immigrant controls, and fanning the flames of nationalist-populist jingoism. With the likes of Donald Trump, Rodrigo Duterte, Bassar al-Assad, Jair Bolsonaro, and Xi Jinping serving as poster boys of the new global political order, one wonders how long the facade masking this pile of rubble (The Invisible Committee 2017) would manage to remain in place.

The lack of imagination in the political sphere is matched only by the lack of imagination in the economic sphere. Since the end of the Cold War and the delegitimization of authoritarian socialism (Milstein 2010a), capitalism has reigned supreme globally despite mounting evidence of its historical complicity in exacerbating inequality and poverty (Therborn 2013; Piketty 2014). Neoliberal freedom has turned out to be nothing but individualized conformity, dressed in the discourse of choice. Capitalism has proven to be durable and adaptable, surviving one crisis after another. The Invisible Committee (2014:17) appears to have gotten it right in saying that “we're not experiencing a crisis of capitalism but rather a triumph of crisis capitalism.”

Many critics of the global capitalist order fall back to old formulae, trying to gain wisdom from the smoke still emanating from the “extinct volcanoes of Marxism” (Luhmann 1995:1), digging up German, Russian, Italian, and Chinese corpses to pick their brains in search for theoretical guidance to revolutionary practice. Karl Marx (1852/1996:32) once said, “tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living,” and it is such an irony that many self-declared

present-day revolutionaries against capitalism could do no better than to “summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names, marching orders, uniforms, in order to enact new scenes in world history, but in this time-honored guise and with this borrowed language.”

However, it is not all doom and gloom. Successes can be found in the cracks of the global system of control and domination: Chiapas and Cheran in Mexico, El Alto in Bolivia, and Rojava in Syria, to name a few. What these communities have in common is not just a sensibility to relate their personal and community troubles to the global system of control trying to take hold of their lives. These communities also exercise the creative imagination to turn the slogan “Another World Is Possible” into reality, relentlessly refusing to bow down to the common sense of how people’s lives should be organized, and boldly asserting their right to self-determination.

How are we to make sense of this mess? C. Wright Mills’ (1959/2000) opening statement in *The Sociological Imagination* (hereafter referred to as *TSI*) still resonates today. People still feel that their lives are a series of traps, and that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles. Reason and freedom, the cherished enlightenment values animating the best of the social sciences, remain imperiled with the creeping extension of societies of control (Deleuze 1992) all over the world. However, Mills’ (1959/2000:5) diagnosis that what people need is “a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves” is proving to be insufficient in our over-explained era. “We live enveloped in a fog of commentaries and commentaries on commentaries, of critiques and critiques of critiques of critiques, of revelations that don’t trigger anything, other than revelations about the revelations” (The Invisible Committee 2017:6).

What people need now is a quality of mind that will not just help them explain the condition of this world and their place in it, but also help them imagine how another world, another way of relating to each other, and another way of organizing society could be possible. What people need is a quality of mind enlivened by a practical utopian sensibility that does not lose itself in the clouds, but rather sees potentialities for freedom in the present (Milstein 2010a), especially in the everyday practices of resistance against different forms of domination.

What people need now is a quality of mind that lends not only a critical eye for intellectual clarity, but also a reconstructive vision of a society founded on the aspiration for a “free society of free individuals” (Milstein 2010a:12). This, I would argue, is the promise of an anarchist sociological imagination.

## Freedom and the Sociological Imagination

Nowadays, there is rarely a student of sociology who has not been introduced to the discipline through *TSI*. It is an ironic twist of fate, considering that the book was Mills’ parting shot to a profession that had become too comfortable serving as handmaiden to people in the halls of power (McQuarie 1989). The sociological imagination is a quality of mind which aims “to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (Mills 1959/2000:6). More concretely, Mills (1959/2000:6–7) posed the following questions as characteristic of the individual who exercises this imagination:

1. What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another? How does it differ from other varieties of social order? Within it, what is the meaning of any particular feature for its continuance and for its change?
2. Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? What is its place within and its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole? How does any particular feature we are examining affect, and how is it affected by, the historical period in which it moves? And this period—what are its essential features? How does it differ from other periods? What are its characteristic ways of history-making?

3. What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of human nature' are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period? And what is the meaning for human nature of each and every feature of the society we are examining?

These questions suggest that understanding personal experience requires a comparative and historical analysis that relates personal circumstances and prospects to the larger structures of society. To elaborate on this, Mills introduced the distinction between personal troubles of milieu and public issues of social structure. Mills (1959/2000:10) noted that "what we experience in various and specific milieu...is often caused by structural changes. Accordingly, to understand the changes of many personal milieus, we are required to look beyond them." The task of the social scientist is "to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals" (Mills 1959/2000:187).

### *The sociological imagination's normative promise*

In "The Promise," *TSI*'s widely-read opening chapter, Mills made a case for the explanatory and sensitizing promise of the sociological imagination. Much less talked about is the sociological imagination's normative promise, which is elaborated in the book's final four chapters. Exercising the sociological imagination holds the promise of realizing the values of truth, reason and freedom. In forwarding this claim, Mills explicitly harked back to social science's roots. "The role of reason in human affairs and the idea of the free individual as the seat of reason are the most important themes inherited by twentieth-century social scientists from the philosophers of the Enlightenment" (Mills 1959/2000:167).

For Mills (1959/2000:174), freedom is not just "the chance to do as one pleases; neither is it merely the opportunity to choose between set alternatives. Freedom is, first of all, the chance to formulate the available choices, to argue over them — and then, the opportunity to choose." To become a free individual in a free society is to have the power to create and shape, within the limits of historical possibility, alternative paths to one's future. As freedom is explicitly linked by Mills to the capacity to make decisions, reason plays an important role in its realization. "Within an individual's biography and within a society's history, the social task of reason is to formulate choices, to enlarge the scope of human decisions in the making of history" (Mills 1959/2000:174).

Exercising the sociological imagination is not just aimed at gaining intellectual clarity. This is not to belittle the value of truth, because "in a world of widely communicated nonsense, any statement of fact is of political and moral significance" (Mills 1959/2000:178). But truth for Mills is just a means to a practical political end. "We study the structural limits of human decision in an attempt to find points of effective intervention, in order to know what can and what must be structurally changed if the role of explicit decision in history-making is to be enlarged" (Mills 1959/2000:174). The aim of exercising the sociological imagination is to gain an understanding of historical social structures, and how they are and can be controlled, in order to realize "a society in which all men would become men of substantive reason, whose independent reasoning would have structural consequences for their societies, its history, and thus for their own life fates" (Mills 1959/2000:173–174).

The normative promise of the sociological imagination is a systematic statement of what Mills (1963:606) called knowledge as an ideal. "What knowledge does to a man in clarifying what he is and setting it free — that is the personal ideal of knowledge. What knowledge does to a civilization in revealing its human meaning and setting it free — that is the social ideal of knowledge." The ideal of knowledge is the enlargement of both individual and collective freedom. That knowledge has instead become an instrument of the elites for the accumulation of power and wealth was Mills' criticism against much of what passed as social science during his time, as can be gleaned in the polemical chapters of *TSI*.

## *Affirming the link between sociology and freedom*

Mills' idea of a linkage between sociology and freedom has been affirmed by other sociologists. Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology* similarly harked back to the enlightenment roots of the so-called humanistic discipline. Berger (1963/2011:176) made a haunting analogy between puppets in a play and men who gained sociological understanding to tease out the connection between sociology and freedom:

We see the puppets dancing on their miniature stage, moving up and down as the strings pull them around, following the prescribed course of their various little parts. We learn to understand the logic of this theater and we find ourselves in its motions. We locate ourselves in society and thus recognize our own position as we hang from its subtle strings. For a moment we see ourselves as puppets indeed. But then we grasp a decisive difference between the puppet theater and our own drama. Unlike the puppets, we have the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved. In this act lies the first step towards freedom.

Decades after Mills and Berger wrote their influential introductory texts to sociology, Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May (2001:11) also posited freedom as the normative end of sociological thinking:

Sociological thinking, as an antifixating power, is therefore a power in its own right. It renders flexible what may have been the oppressive fixity of social relations and in so doing opens up a world of possibilities. The art of sociological thinking is to widen the scope and the practical effectiveness of freedom.

Echoing Mills' (1959/2000) emphasis on the human variety, Bauman and May (2001) argued that thinking sociologically facilitates mutual agreement, tolerance, and, ultimately, a freer society. "We may better appreciate the human individual in them and perhaps learn to respect that which every civilized society must entitle them in order to sustain itself: their right to do what we do, so that they may choose and practice their ways of life according to their preferences" (Bauman and May 2001:11). This is the key to gaining substantive freedom, for "there are no greater guarantees of individual freedom than the freedom of us all" (Bauman and May 2001:12).

## *Deviations from the sociological imagination's normative promise*

The link between sociology and freedom has been widely articulated since the publication and popularization of *TSI*. This is not to say, however, that this has translated into practice. "[T]hat sociology is the power of the powerless...is not always the case, particularly in those places where it is practiced that find themselves under increasing pressures to conform to governmental expectations" (Bauman and May 2001:12). Mills would have rolled over his grave had he witnessed the development of fields of sociology that pushed for the application of the sociological imagination in crafting marketing strategies (DeWeese 1983) for the big corporations and power elites that Mills fought against in his lifetime. The sociological imagination has also been watered down with its widespread application for producing soundbites for media outfits, "a fast-food version of nutrient, a sprinkling of holy water on the commercial trend of the moment, and a trivialization of insight" (Gitlin 2000:240).

There have been many initiatives to stay true to Mills' vision of the promise of sociology, with Michael Burawoy's (2016) concept of sociology as a vocation as one prominent recent example. Burawoy argued that while the sensitizing promise of the sociological imagination has been widely recognized, the reception to its normative promise has been more ambivalent. This speaks to the tensions inherent to the practice of sociology between its scientific and political orientation, i.e. its anti-utopian and utopian dispositions (Burawoy 2016). Pre-occupied with the problem of maintaining the scientific pose, many hesitate at Mills' plea for a passionate commitment to the normative goals of the sociological enterprise,

not recognizing that “anyone who spends his life studying society and publishing the results *is* acting morally and usually politically as well” (Mills 1959/2000:79).

To realize its normative promise, the sociological imagination needs the infusion of a sensibility that will bring out explicitly its commitment to reason and freedom. Such sensibility should not just aid the sociological imagination in critically exposing structural hindrances that prevent the realization of its cherished values, but also in articulating a reconstructive vision of how such values could take root and flourish in society. This suggests the practice of sociology not just as a scientific enterprise but also as a political project (Burawoy 2016). Following Mills’ (1962) lead, this project should be grounded in a political philosophy that provides an ideology in terms of which certain institutions and practices are justified and others attacked, an ethic or an articulation of ideals, strategies and programs that embody both ends and means, and a clear theoretical conceptualization of the human individual, society and history.

Insofar as the values of reason and freedom are cherished ends, I argue that the political philosophy that would imbue the sociological imagination with the sensibility that would realize its normative promise is the much-maligned philosophy of anarchism.

## **Anarchism as the Political Philosophy of Freedom**

At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Emma Goldman (1910) noted how anarchism had to contend “with the combined ignorance and venom of the world it aims to reconstruct.” A century after Goldman’s observation, anarchism remains “one of the most demonized and misconceived political ideologies of our times” (Wigger 2016:129). The marginalization and misunderstanding of anarchism has been largely caused by the repudiation, ridicule, and misconception of proponents of contending philosophies: liberals, neoliberals, and most specially Marxists (Critchley 2013).

Carne Ross (2019) posits that anarchism is one of the oldest political philosophies in the world, as it could be conceptualized simply as how humans organized their affairs before authority and government existed. If we equate anarchism generally to anti-authoritarianism (Gelderloos 2010), we could say that anarchic strains of thought had been around since the first attempts to fight against tyrannical rule (Bookchin 1982), including non-Western contexts (Ramnath 2019).

Anarchism as a distinct Enlightenment-era political philosophy in Europe began to take shape when William Godwin penned a theory of a stateless society and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1840/1994:209) declared “as man seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy.” These initial ideas would be expounded on, developed, and refined by several generations of radicals including Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, Gustav Landauer, Rudolf Rocker, and Errico Malatesta to fill out what would be called classical Anarchism. This so-called big-A Anarchism (Milstein 2010a) thrived as part of a large internationalist left until it suffered a decisive blow with the defeat of the Spanish anarchists under the hands of the combined forces of fascism and authoritarian socialism during the Spanish revolution in the 1930s.

After decades of going under the radar because of the hegemony of liberal democracy and authoritarian socialism after World War II, the black flag of anarchism saw the light of day again during the tumultuous but inspiring year of 1968 (Bookchin 1971; Ward 1982/1996), which marked the flourishing of the so-called new social movements (Day 2004). During the anti-globalization protests in November 1999 against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, the “new anarchists” (Graeber 2002) took center stage and triggered the anarchist turn (Critchley 2013) in anti-capitalist organizing and theorizing. The new anarchism that emerged at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century combined the basic tenets of classical Anarchism with elements from Situationist thought, social ecology, feminism, anti-nuclear movements, the Do-It-Yourself and insurrectionary philosophy of the Autonomen of West Germany, and the anti-globalization and indigenous resistance sparked by the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico (Milstein 2010b).

It is this so-called “small-a” anarchism that I refer to as the political philosophy that would revitalize the sociological imagination. I define anarchism as a critical and reconstructive philosophy of “striving toward a free society of free individuals” (Mills 2010a:12). I will unpack this definition by elaborating on three elements: the philosophy’s aspiration, its critical edge, and its reconstructive vision.

### *The aspiration*

A free society of free individuals sounds “deceptively simple” (Milstein 2010a:12). Anarchism is an attempt to synthesize the liberal aim of “an individual who can live an emancipated life” and the socialist aim of “a community structured along collectivist lines.” (Milstein 2010a:13). Anarchism acknowledges the tension between individual and collective freedom, and instead of propping up one side of the equation like liberalism and authoritarian socialism did, anarchism asks the more pragmatic question: “Acknowledging this self-society juggling act as part of the human condition, how can people collectively self-determine their lives to become who they want to be and simultaneously create communities that are all they could be as well?” (Milstein 2010a:14).

Anarchism’s attempt to engage a seemingly unbridgeable conceptual chasm has been used to characterize it as a mere intersection of several ideologies (Miller 1984) or a point of overlap between liberalism and socialism (Heywood 2012) instead of a distinct coherent philosophy. Laurence Davis (2019:48) contended, however, that “far from being a weakness or a sign of incoherence, efforts by anarchists to maximize individuality *and* community highlight anarchism’s pluralistic and contested character, and its ideologically unique balancing of individuality and community in a dynamic and creative tension.” Anarchists engage this tension between individual and social freedom and turn it into a creative exercise, “figuring out ways to coexist and thrive in our differentiation” (Milstein 2010a:15). This tension underlies anarchism’s recognition of human diversity and experimental spirit, which allows it to remain a “practice-grounded political ideology” (Davis 2019:65) as opposed to a praxis of theory (Bookchin 1971) that both liberalism and scientific socialism had become.

The anarchist combination of individual and collective freedom as a mutual but tension-filled aspiration stems from its view of society as a network of relationships instead of an agglomeration of discrete human individuals. This relational view can be gleaned from Gustav Landauer’s (1910/2010:214) conception of the state as a social relationship which can only be destroyed “by people relating to one another differently.” It underlies The Invisible Committee’s (2014) reflection on the relationship between freedom and friendship, how the two words share the same linguistic roots, and why “freedom isn’t the act of shedding our attachments, but the practical capacity to work on them, to move around in their space, to form or dissolve them” (The Invisible Committee 2009:32). It informs Nick Montgomery and Carla Bergman’s (2017:126–127) beautiful conception of freedom: “If relationships are what compose the world—and what shape our desires, values, and capacities—then freedom is the capacity to participate more actively in this process of composition.”

The anarchists’ relational view of society resonates with Mills’ (1959/2000) argument that the individual and society cannot be understood apart from each other, imploring us to use our sociological imagination to make explicit the relationship between biography and history, and between private troubles and public issues. Bauman and May (2001:5) similarly viewed human actions as elements of wider figurations, which led them to propose the following central question of sociology: “How do the types of social relations and societies that we inhabit relate to how we see each other, ourselves and our knowledge, actions and their consequences?” This anarchist and sociological convergence on a relational view of society results to an affinity in aspirations of an enlarged space for individuals of independent reasoning, i.e. free individuals who could meaningfully participate in making collective history (Mills 1959/2000).



## *The critical edge*

As part of a large tradition of Leftist thinking that emerged in opposition to capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, anarchism has always possessed a critical edge. However, it has often been overlooked in inventories of critical systems of thought, unlike Marxism and even more recent approaches like feminism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism (Wigger 2016). This oversight may be due to the perception that anarchism is primarily a political project (Wigger 2016), rather than a coherent system of thought, helped in no part by the reluctance of many anarchists to engage with academia, which is viewed as a part of modern society's array of hierarchical and dominating institutions (Shantz and Williams 2014).

Classical Anarchism set itself up against capitalism, the state, and organized religion. This opposition is rooted in the theory that all forms of government – state and non-state alike – rest on violence and are therefore wrong and unnecessary (Goldman 1910). Angela Wigger (2016:134) argued that “it might be more accurate to label Anarchism as essentially anti-capitalist first, and to subordinate the question of overcoming the state as part of Anarchism’s agenda to defeat capitalism,” based on the association of Anarchists with The First International. However, as Goldman (1910:22) made clear, “while all Anarchists agree that the main evil today is an economic one, they maintain that the solution of that evil can be brought about only through the consideration of *every phase* of life, — individual, as well as the collective; the internal, as well as the external phases.”

The revitalized anarchism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century expanded its critique to hierarchy in general. Murray Bookchin was a key figure in this reinvention, building on the work of Kropotkin to integrate the principles of ecology and anarchism, develop a holistic theory of hierarchy, and “find the unifying threads that overcome the disjunctions between nonhuman and human nature” (Bookchin 1982:iv). Bookchin (1982:4) defined hierarchy as “a complex system of command and obedience in which elites enjoy varying degrees of control over their subordinates without necessarily exploiting them.” The abolition of exploitative bourgeois class relations would not necessarily lead to a freer and more egalitarian society if other forms of hierarchies are perpetuated, e.g. the emergence of the coordinator class in Marxist-Leninist projects (Albert 2004). Anarchist critique transcends class-based critique, creating affinities with different struggles that aim to defeat structures of oppression and subjection in all spheres of social life (Wigger 2016).

Anarchism’s critique of hierarchy and domination is primarily an ethical one, centered on defending freedom from the crippling effects of vertical power relationships. The struggle against domination proceeds from the premise that vertical authority usurps the power of people to collectively achieve their potential. “There’s nothing oppressive about power per se,” said the Crimethinc collective (2018:9). “Many kinds of power can be liberating...there are ways to develop your capabilities that increase others’ freedom as well.” It is when power-together relations are supplanted by power-over relations (Milstein 2010a) that the people’s capacity for collective self-determination and self-organization gets stifled.

To deepen their critique of the social psychological aspect of hierarchic relations, anarchists have increasingly drawn on Baruch Spinoza’s concept of joy, not in its usual usage as a synonym to happiness, but rather as the capacity to affect and be affected (Montgomery and bergman 2017). Drawing on post-structuralist and autonomist influences, recent anarchist literature defines its broad object of critique using the concept of Empire, “the web of control that exploits and administers life – ranging from the most brutal forms of domination to the subtlest inculcation of anxiety and isolation,” which “separate people from their power, their creativity, and their ability to connect with each other and their worlds” (Montgomery and bergman 2017:48). Anarchists argue that Empire’s subjection of people to hierarchic organization close off or inhibit them from their capacity to participate in composing relations, i.e. in shaping their world(s). Empire transmits sad affects, not in the sense of a feeling of despair or unhappiness, but in the incapacitation of people to collectively feel or do something new. The joyless life under Empire is a regimented life that attempts “to bring us all into the same world, with one

morality, one history, and one direction and to convert differences into hierarchical, violent divisions” (Montgomery and bergman 2017:48). Joylessness goes hand in hand with unfreedom.

The anarchist ethical critique of hierarchical relations has been supported by practical arguments, especially in the anarchist ecological literature. Bookchin’s (1964; 1982) expansion of Kropotkin’s exploration of a natural basis for non-hierarchic organization was a forerunner in this regard. Healthy ecosystems are characterized by complexity that hinges on the principle of unity in diversity. Humans have been dangerously simplifying their environment, undoing the complexity which was a product of organic evolution. The simplification of nature by humans is exemplified by widescale urbanization, which is rapidly replacing the organic with the inorganic. The massive scale of urbanization is causing not just environmental destruction but also logistical problems of organization, including transportation, housing, and food production. This leads to ecological imbalances that imperil nature’s capacity to support highly complex life forms. Human ecological destruction may be traced to humans’ hierarchical attitude towards nature. This, in turn, may be traced to humans’ hierarchical attitude towards fellow humans. A practical case could be made then against hierarchic organization as the biggest threat to human survival (Bookchin 1982). Anarchist thought has contributed much to the expanding literature implicating Empire to the problem of planetary climate change (Sethness-Castro 2012; Kahn 2010).

### *The reconstructive vision*

More than its expansive critique of domination, anarchism is distinguished from other political philosophies by its emphasis on a vision of a society that has transcended hierarchical relations. While its critical edge asserts the idea of liberation or negative freedom, i.e. “freedom from,” its vision gives equal importance to positive freedom, i.e. “freedom to” (Milstein 2010a). The anarchist vision is reconstructive. It is not a mere thought experiment, but a reality lived through transformative praxis (Wigger 2016). Anarchism has a utopian but at the same time practical sensibility. As Milstein (2010a:67) put it:

The utopian sensibility in anarchism is this curious faith that humanity can not only demand the impossible but also realize it. It is a leap of faith, but grounded in and indeed gleaned from actual experiences, large and small, when people gift egalitarian lifeways to each other by creating them collectively.

The practical utopianism of anarchism rests on the observation that non-hierarchic forms of organizing and of relating to each other already exist in our day-to-day lives. Colin Ward (1982/1996:18) interpreted anarchism not as a speculative vision of a future society, but as a “description of a mode of human organization, rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our society.” Existing human organization may be viewed as being of two types: one which is forced on people and run from above, and the other which is run from below, which can not force people to do anything, and which people are free to join or free to leave alone (Ward 1966). Anarchists advocate largening the scope of the second type of organization, which we all participate in whenever we engage with others through non-controlling associations and relationships. Paul Goodman (1945/2010:25) argued that “a free society cannot be the substitution of a new order for the old order; it is the extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of the social life.”

Anarchist ideas on revolution are paradoxically proximate but distant at the same time. On one hand, the revolution is proximate because there are plenty of examples of non-hierarchic organizing, mutual aid, cooperative relations, and everyday resistance against domination that already provide materials for an anarchist society, “like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state and its bureaucracy, capitalism and its waste, privilege and its injustices, nationalism and its suicidal loyalties, religious differences and their superstitious separatism” (Ward 1982/1996:18). On the other hand, the revolution is distant because it requires not just a widespread transformation in form but

also in substance of the relations that compose the world. In her explanation of the failure of the Bolsheviks to bring about a true socialist revolution in Russia, Goldman (1923/2003:259) insisted that a true revolution requires a fundamental transvaluation of values: “Our institutions and conditions rest upon deep-seated ideas. To change those conditions and at the same time leave the underlying ideas and values intact means only a superficial transformation, one that cannot be permanent or bring real betterment.”

Because of the necessity of substantive, not just formal, transformation, and because the seeds of the revolution already exist in the present, anarchists insist that means and ends should be commensurable in realizing its reconstructive vision, as “the means employed become, through individual habit and social practice, part and parcel of the final purpose” (Goldman 1923/2003:260). This ethical position undergirds the primary methods of anarchist transformative praxis, namely direct action and prefiguration. Direct action means getting things done in the present without representation, proceeding from the conviction that “the only way to build such new social relationships and institutions is to birth and nurture them ourselves” (Milstein 2010a:71). Prefiguration means that anarchist strategies and tactics ought to reflect the anarchist end, as “getting there already brings new forms of organization and institutions into being” (Wigger 2016:134). As Goldman (1923/2003:262) beautifully put it:

To-day is the parent of to-morrow. The present casts its shadow far into the future. That is the law of life, individual and social. Revolution that divests itself of ethical values thereby lays the foundation of injustice, deceit, and oppression for the future society. The *means* used to *prepare* the future become its *cornerstone*.

The focus of anarchist strategy “lies on the presence rather than the future” (Wigger 2016:134). The realization of the anarchist vision of a joyful transformation of life under Empire lies not in the pursuit of a lofty distant goal directed by a universal theory, but through struggling in one’s own situation (Montgomery and bergman 2017). There is no ironclad program on the future (Goldman 1927). Many contemporary anarchistic movements take inspiration from the Zapatistan idea of *preguntando caminamos* – ‘asking, we walk.’ (Sitrin 2012). This open-endedness distinguishes anarchism from liberalism and Marxism, the bourgeois scientificism of which make both these political philosophies the ‘praxis of theory’ (Bookchin 1971), which has the intellectual consequence of imposing bounds upon the horizons within which society can be conceptualized (Holloway 2002). Anarchist theorizing, in contrast, is primarily informed and driven by actual participation in different struggles to gain spaces of freedom in the cracks of Empire. Montgomery and bergman (2017:27) called this form of theorizing as affirmative theory:

Theory can also explore connections and ask open-ended questions. It can affirm and elaborate on something people already intuit or sense. It can celebrate and inspire; it can move. We want a kind of theory that participates in struggle and the growth of shared power rather than directing it or evaluating it from outside. We are after a kind of theory that is critical but also affirmative. Rather than pointing to the limits or shortcomings of movements and declaring what they should do, affirmative theory homes in on the most transformative edges and margins.

The reconstructive vision of anarchism is dynamic, embracing the complexity of society by acknowledging and working with lateral and historical differences, and accepting a multiplicity in forms of struggles against domination. In the practice of direct action and prefigurative politics, “present-tense experiments and practices are always unfinished and imperfect, and thus in process” (Wigger 2016:135). The anarchists’ processual understanding of its vision stimulates creative audacity, which allows the imagination and actualization of alternative pathways to a free society of free individuals.

# The Promise of an Anarchist Sociological Imagination

The shared concern with social structures and their implications on individual and collective freedom creates affinities between sociology and anarchism. Many scholars have attempted to synthesize the two traditions. One of the forerunners in this regard is Howard Ehrlich, a self-identified anarchist sociologist (1991) who was a leading figure in the Radical Sociology Movement of the late 1960s. Ehrlich did not explicitly outline what an anarchist sociology could look like or what its aims could be. His scholarship instead reflects the praxis of the engaged anti-authoritarian intellectual (Ehrlich 2001), who is concerned not so much with theory-building but rather with producing and contributing knowledge that would be of use to movements fighting for the enlargement of freedoms.

Jonathan Purkis (2004) offered a more defined vision of how an anarchist sociology could look like in practice. He posed the following questions to animate the sociological research agenda and bring it to an anarchist direction: “How is power formed and perpetuated? Why do people desire their own oppression? How should we research these things sensitively? What should we do with the results when we get them?” (Purkis 2004:53–54).

So far, the most promising attempt at a synthesis between anarchism and sociology is by Jeff Shantz and Dana Williams. Their attempted marriage between the two systems of thought leans more towards anarchizing the sociological tradition than sociologizing anarchist practice. Shantz and Williams (2014:9) defined anarchist sociology as “the action-oriented study and theoretically-informed transformation of societies.” This means revitalizing sociology with the infusion of the ethics that animate anarchism. “Since anarchism is rooted in values and practice, we seek to re-center sociology upon key anarchist values and foci, particularly freedom, anti-authoritarianism, direct action, mutual aid, and decentralization” (Shantz and Williams 2014:11).

My call for an anarchist sociological imagination does not stray far from Shantz and Williams’ vision for an anarchist sociology. However, while Shantz and Williams’ intervention aims at reinventing the sociological discipline itself, I retain Mills’ original concept of the sociological imagination as a non-disciplinary sensibility that sociologists and non-sociologists alike would find useful in understanding society and one’s place in it. Infusing the sociological imagination with an anarchist sensibility entails moving beyond grasping history and biography and their relations within society. It means posing the aspiration for freedom front and center as the motivation driving the act of making sense of the world. It means substantially living in the present, inhabiting and being attuned to situations in order to find opportunities for resisting domination and expanding freedom. It means being actively engaged in transformative struggles against Empire.

To this end, I propose the following supplement to Mills’ list of questions that animate one who exercises the sociological imagination:

4. How is freedom defined in this society at this point in history? How actively do people participate in composing the relationships that comprise their world? What institutional arrangements impede people from formulating alternatives and making choices on how to live their lives? What forms of control and domination are legitimated and what are frowned upon? Which group of people gets to exercise more control over their lives than others?
5. How is domination and control resisted in this society? Which group of people are leading this resistance? How are people creating spaces of collective self-determination within the web of control enveloping them? What ways of organizing are being offered and tested as alternatives to the dominating relationships engendered by Empire? How are these initiatives exposing cracks in the edifice of Empire? How could these alternatives to the dominant order be affirmed, defended, and linked with other transformative struggles?

The anarchist sociological imagination does not differ from Mills’ concept in terms of his prescription to spell out intersections between history and biography within society. It demands, however, an

explicit articulation of the sociological imagination's normative aspiration for freedom, much like how anarchism "brings an egalitarian ethics out into the world, making it transparent, public, and shared" (Milstein 2010a:49). This offers ethical directionality to one's effort to gain a sociological understanding of one's situation. I proceed from the premise that all attempts at understanding the world are ethically-informed. Insisting on a so-called value-free "scientific" stance in social inquiry is itself an ethical position, albeit largely a white Eurocentric and patriarchal one (Montgomery and bergman 2017). As Milstein (2010a:48–49) noted,

Humans have shown themselves capable of almost unlimited imagination and innovation...People have used this capacity to do both great good and great harm...It makes sense to first ask what people want to do and why, from an ethical standpoint, and then get to the pragmatic how-to questions. The very process of asking what's right is how people fill out ethics in praxis, to meet new demands and dilemmas, new social conditions and contexts.

Advocating for an anarchist sociological imagination does not mean insisting that one should subscribe fully to anarchism before such imagination could be exercised. In the same vein that the goal of anarchism is not to turn everyone into anarchists but rather "to encourage people to think and act for themselves, [and] to do both from a set of emancipatory values" (Milstein 2010a:49), the call for an anarchist sociological imagination is meant to encourage people to think sociologically with a clear eye toward realizing its normative promise of individual and collective freedom. Going back to Berger's (1963/2011) puppet theater analogy, sociological understanding does not stop at realizing that we are puppets being pulled by the subtle strings of the structures of the society we live in. Rather, we seek to understand the logic of this puppet theater and the mechanisms by which we have been moved in order to reduce our being puppets and to gain more substantive control over our lives.

The why of knowledge is just as important as the how. The individual who practices the anarchist sociological imagination takes seriously questions regarding the purpose of knowledge. The promise of freedom would only be realized if it serves as the goal of sociological understanding from the onset. By insisting on the explicit articulation of its normative goals, the anarchist sociological imagination brings to the fore Mills' polemic against both a social science concerned with trivial content and a social science that serves the interest of the power elites. Both trivialization and instrumentalization of sociological knowledge are especially acute in academia, which is plagued by the problems of impenetrable intellectualization posing as professional advance in knowledge and technologization in the interests of research funders. As Hartung (1983:88) noted, "once a theory is taken from the streets or factories and into the academy, there is the risk that revolutionary potential will be subverted to scholarship." The anarchist sociological imagination seeks to preserve knowledge's revolutionary and emancipatory potential.

Aside from exposing and explaining structural impediments to freedom, the anarchist sociological imagination actively seeks exemplars of resistance against domination. The important enterprise of translating personal troubles to public issues goes hand-in-hand with translating individual to collective struggles. It is not a matter of people needing to understand how systems of control work before effective resistance could be waged. A lot of times, it is through acts of resistance that mechanisms of domination get revealed in ways that compel collective responses (Montgomery and bergman 2017).

The individual who exercises the anarchist sociological imagination possesses a quality of mind that is not only critical but also reconstructive, seeing not only structural constraints to but also structural possibilities for freedom. Reconstructive vision is the product of both an awareness of the bigger picture and of being intensely present in situations. One becomes aware of the structural opportunities for expanding freedom sociologically through systematic comparative and historical analysis, and in an anarchist fashion through actual prefigurative practice of ways of living and organizing that eschew domination and control. This means taking seriously Mills' (1959/2000) advice that one should learn to use one's life experience in intellectual work and be personally involved in every intellectual product one's involved in. The exercise of the anarchist sociological imagination is not a detached intellectualism but an active transformative praxis.

The anarchist sociological imagination looks beyond the state and other types of formal hierarchical organizations that are the usual objects of interest of sociological investigation in its search for viable alternatives to the ways of life offered by Empire. It questions the efficacy of using vertical power relations such as statist and managerialist solutions in realizing egalitarian ends and substantive freedom. It trains the spotlight on the voluntary cooperation and largely non-hierarchical ways of relating and organizing that characterize a significant portion of social life (Shantz and Williams 2014; Ward 1982/1966). It proceeds from the anarchist premise that the seeds to realizing a free society of free individuals are on hand and not something that would manifest only in a post-revolutionary future.

The anarchist sociological imagination's emphasis on finding potential for freedom in the present is not based on an unfounded optimism or a naïve positive view of human nature. Instead, it stems from the recognition and acceptance of society's complexity. Domination is the outcome of responding to complexity through simplification (Bookchin 1982). The anarchic response, on the other hand, means learning to live with complexity, just like how one steers through the waves in navigating the ocean. Uncertainty is seen as a necessary correlate to complexity. As Montgomery and bergman (2017:33) noted, "uncertainty is where we need to begin, because experimentation and curiosity is part of what has been stolen from us. Empire works in part by making us feel impotent, corroding our abilities to shape worlds together." Despite the overbearing reality of unfreedom in the hierarchical world of Empire, things can become, and in many instances are already, otherwise.

Freedom is the chance to create, deliberate on, and choose alternative pathways in life (Mills 1959/2000). Expanding spaces of individual and collective freedom goes hand in hand with acknowledging the human variety and celebrating these differences. In a complex world, there could be no hard blueprint to an emancipated future. Struggles against domination and control look different everywhere because everywhere is different (Montgomery and bergman 2017). A crucial goal in comparative and historical analysis is finding affinities between these struggles, and subsequently creating connections that would facilitate the increase in collective transformative power (Montgomery and bergman 2017).

We do not seek the illusory intellectual security of a universal theory of human history and society, an unfortunate legacy of Empire that plagues modern systems of thought including sociology. The sociological imagination should serve not as a blanket with which to smother our aspirations for freedom with technocratic prescriptions of how we should live our lives, but as "a helpful lens to view the potentially most successful avenues towards change" (Shantz and Williams 2014:10). Its normative promise would be realized only if the way we think is itself an exemplar of the freedom we aspire for: cognizant of human diversity, non-controlling in purpose, and experimental in spirit. The anarchist sociological imagination engenders a quality of mind that seeks to understand the world not in order to command it, but to support and participate in the process of its joyful transformation towards a free society of free individuals.

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