PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hidden in Plain Sight: Insurrectionary Anarchism in the Anti-Government Extremism Landscape

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Volume XVIII, Issue 1
March 2024

ISSN: 2334-3745
DOI: 10.19165/2024.4797

Abstract: Anti-government extremism (AGE) stands as a significant contemporary manifestation of political violence. As such, recent scholarly publications have sought to provide novel conceptualisations and analyses of this phenomenon. Despite these valuable contributions, a prominent expression of anti-government extremism – insurrectionary anarchism – is largely absent from the scholarly debate. The aim of this article is thus to narrow this gap by providing a comprehensive exploration and overview of insurrectionary anarchism. To do so, this article builds on the definitions and frameworks elaborated in recent publications to demonstrate that insurrectionary anarchism can and should be included in the contemporary debate on anti-government extremism. Adopting a distinction between ideological and issue-driven anti-government extremism proposed in the literature, this analysis argues that, while insurrectionary anarchism's fundamental opposition to any hierarchical power structures remains its underlying rationale and justification, it essentially functions as a phenomenon driven by specific issues. As part of a lively and varied milieu, insurrectionary anarchist AGE shares parallels with the broader spectrum of anti-government extremism, including an inclination for conspiracy thinking and systematic targeting of politicians and/or governmental representatives. Although it diverges in scale and operational methods from other expressions of AGE, insurrectionary anarchism continues to represent a complex phenomenon that also holds the potential for escalation.

Keywords: Anti-government extremism, anti-state, insurrectionary anarchism, political violence, Informal Anarchist Federation, Conspiracy of the Cells of Fire, terrorism

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Introduction

In recent years, anti-government extremism (AGE) has re-emerged as a major contemporary form of political violence, prompting scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to identify it as a substantial threat to "democracy, political processes, institutions, and elected politicians."[1] Consequently, a wealth of scholarly articles has recently attempted to enhance academic conversations and shed light on the complex and multifaceted nature of anti-government extremism. Among these, two Special Issues published in *Perspectives on Terrorism* stand out. The first issue was published in December 2022, with the second one becoming available a few months later, in March 2023.

Overall, the research articles featured in the Special Issues have made substantial contributions to the study of anti-government extremism, ranging from the role of conspiracy theories to the analysis of specific organisations and movements – such as Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, QAnon, or the German Reichsbürger[2] – and of the patterns of attacks and threats directed towards politicians. However, both issues primarily feature studies on right-wing AGE. Other expressions of anti-government extremism – such as left-wing or anarchist extremism – receive only passing mentions in the context of historical overviews or, occasionally, in endnotes. To their credit, the editors – Tore Bjørgo and Kurt Braddock – sought to cover a broader variety of anti-government movements to include studies not limited to the far-right. The intention envisioned the inclusion of historical and/or contemporary anarchist movements. Yet the call for papers did not result in "contributions of sufficient quality to address left-wing forms of anti-government extremism."[3] Hence, the overwhelming emphasis on right-wing extremism. Additionally, this focus comes with a limited geographical scope, primarily centred on a handful of countries, such as the United States of America, Australia, Germany, and Norway.

The absence of noteworthy contributions – or any contributions at all – on far-left and anarchist extremism in the Special Issues is symptomatic of a broader problem within the scholarly debate on terrorism and political violence: the dearth of meaningful engagement and research that could provide accurate portrayals and analyses of these forms of extremism. Drawing on the four forms of anti-government extremism and the conceptual discussions provided in the Special Issues, this article thus seeks to address the gap identified by the editors by providing an overview of contemporary anarchist anti-government extremism, thereby partially rectifying the lack of engagement with this issue. While its contributions do not do justice to the complexity, nuances, and importance of the topic, this analysis can stimulate a reinvigorated debate on left-wing and anarchist extremism in the terrorism and political violence literature.

The article will begin by critically examining the field and discussing the potential reasons underlying the lack of scholarly inquiry into anarchist violence. Thereafter, it will discuss anarchist anti-government extremism vis-à-vis the conceptual distinction between ideological

AGE and issue-driven AGE provided by Jackson in his contribution to the Special Issues.[4] Finally, the concluding section of the article will undertake an analysis of contemporary anarchist AGE using the two remaining forms identified in the Special Issues – namely conspiracy theories and attacks on politicians and/or governmental representatives.[5]

Why Should We Care About Anarchist Extremism?

In his famous theory, David C. Rapoport argues that modern terrorism developed through four distinct waves over the last century and a half: the anarchist, the ethno-nationalist (or anti-colonial), the New Left, and the "religious" wave.[6] While scholars have speculated about a potential fifth wave, the decline of the previous waves does not imply the complete disappearance of the forms and expressions of violence associated with them.[7] In the context of anarchist violence, Ariel Koch is, therefore, correct when asserting that "the first (anarchist) wave is still relevant for Europe and North America and should be considered a potential threat."[8] However, the contemporary expression of this first wave – insurrectionary anarchism – received scant scholarly attention. As a few scholars have underscored, insurrectionary anarchism represents "a neglected topic," an "under-researched phenomenon," or an "under-researched milieu."[9] It is noteworthy that, while scholars have been reticent, practitioners and law enforcement agencies have diligently monitored the developments occurring within the anarchist universe. Notably, some of the documents and reports published by these entities – e.g., the yearly Europol Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT), or reports by the European Commission – represent some of the most compelling and comprehensive sources concerning anarchist extremism.[10] The question then arises: why has there been limited scholarly engagement with this subject? A few interrelated factors might provide an answer to this question.

First, a partial explanation can be found in "the event-driven nature of terrorism studies, with research interests influenced by dramatic developments in the terrorist threat and government's changing counterterrorism priorities" which inevitably leads to "the exclusion of other subjects no less deserving of attention."[11] Consequently, research on terrorism and political violence tends to focus on what constitutes – or what is perceived as – the most pressing security concern or threat. Whereas studies on al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other Jihadist organisations have dominated the post-9/11 era, the last few years have witnessed a surge in investigations of far-right extremism – as also reflected in the Special Issues. Therefore, the lack of robust scholarly engagement with anarchist extremism can be linked, in part, to a lower perception of the threat and risk associated with this phenomenon. This is not to say that anarchist violence is infrequent – quite the opposite. The lack of scholarly inquiry is then even more surprising "considering the contrast existing between the current poor number of studies on violent left-wing and anarchist extremism (…) and the quite high numbers of left-wing and anarchist attacks reported by Europol every year."[12] Rather than being an issue of *quantity*, there is a matter of *quality* when it comes to anarchist violence. Anarchists tend to prioritise

actions against property and infrastructure over lethal violence, even though their attacks do occasionally result in casualties.[13] The non-resort to lethal violence does not, however, make anarchists less destructive or less disruptive. In fact, anarchists do pose a serious security threat in several countries. For example, according to Europol, eighteen out of the 28 completed, foiled, or failed terrorist attacks recorded in the EU in 2022 were perpetrated by left-wing and anarchist individuals or groups.[14] These attacks have resulted in damage amounting to millions of euros.[15] Furthermore, in February 2023, the Italian intelligence service noted that insurrectionary anarchism poses the "most concrete and vital" threat to the country as far as clandestine political violence is concerned.[16] Similarly, anarchism still represents, along with ultranationalism, a leading and ongoing threat to the security and political stability of Greece, and a recurring concern in countries like Chile or Spain.[17] In other countries, instead, it poses a lower risk. For example, the UK considers the anarchist threat to be a low one.[18] Overall, the lower profile of anarchist violence might contribute to its lesser appeal as a topic for scholarly investigation.

Linked to this is the prevailing notion that anarchism is an inherently pacifist ideology. While it is undeniable that most anarchists embrace non-violent methods and pacifist ideals, it is equally indisputable that some adherents espouse violence as a legitimate means to achieve their goals.[19] After all, as the next section will discuss, the ideology of anarchism can be somewhat convoluted and, at times, incoherent.

Another potential explanation for the lack of scholarly engagement with anarchist extremism might reside in its geographical distribution. While the current resurgence of far-right politics is a global phenomenon, studies on far-right violence have mostly – albeit not exclusively – covered the Anglosphere along with some North European countries, a trend reflected in the geographical focus of the Special Issues. In contrast, contemporary anarchist extremism is more concentrated in Southern European nations such as Italy, Spain, and Greece, as well as countries like Mexico, Chile, Brazil, Indonesia, Syria, and Ukraine, where several anarchist foreign fighters have participated in the respective conflicts.[20] Therefore, one may argue that a language barrier is preventing scholars from Anglophone countries from investigating anarchist extremism. To their credit, several anarchist websites and blogs translate their posts into different languages thereby partially – and, arguably, inadvertently – resolving this challenge for researchers who are not proficient in those languages. Beyond the potential language barrier, investigating local expressions of anarchist violence undoubtedly requires an understanding of the political, social, historical, and cultural contexts in which they emerge. Doing so will inevitably require the field of terrorism and political studies to broaden its geographical scope and areas of inquiry beyond the topical far-right extremism or Jihadism.

Finally, a recent report suggests that the concepts and ideas associated with the far-left and anarchism align more closely with mainstream societal notions, such as anti-fascism, anti-

racism, and socioeconomic issues.[21] This convergence, coupled with the lower magnitude of anarchist violence discussed above, results in anarchist ideas evoking less astonishment and rejection than their far-right or Jihadist counterparts. Although it is undeniable that far-right politics and ideas are also gaining mainstream traction, potentially leading to the normalisation of extremist ideas, the comparatively "acceptable" nature of anarchist ideals – combined with the less lethal *modus operandi* – helps explain why this topic has received less scholarly attention.[22]

In summary, several factors contribute to relegating the topic of anarchist extremism to the periphery of academic inquiry. These factors include the field's inclination towards more striking forms of terrorism, misconceptions as to the very nature of anarchist extremism, a limited geographical scope, and the perception that anarchist ideas are "less radical." There are, of course, several scholars who have authored seminal works on different aspects of anarchism and anarchist extremism.[23] Yet, these efforts remain a minority, and the knowledge gap persists. As a recent report aptly summarised, there are no exact figures or fresh data about both attacks and attackers, there is no wide-range analysis on the use of the Internet and social media, and the drivers of anarchist radicalisation and extremism are poorly understood.[24] Similarly, anarchism has received little attention in approaches, programmes, and initiatives to prevent or counter violent extremism.[25] Finally, relatively little is known about anarchist foreign fighters' participation in conflict around the world.[26] Therefore, in alignment with the objective of the Special Issues on AGE, this article endeavours to "contribute to open a scholarly discussion on these issues and give us a better grasp on this slippery AGE concept and phenomenon."[27]

The Four Forms: Placing Anarchism in the Anti-Government Landscape

In the introduction to the Special Issues, Bjørgo and Braddock outline four forms of anti-government extremism, with the first one pertaining to movements, networks, organisations, and individuals that reject the legitimacy of the government *in toto* refusing to submit to its authority. The second form refers to the propagation of conspiracy theories that undermine the legitimacy of governments, their institutions, policies, and political opponents. Then, the third form centres on issue-oriented demonstrations and opposition to specific policies, whereas the last involves violent attacks, plots, threats, and harassment targeting politicians and governmental representatives.[28] Since the first and third forms substantially align and overlap with Jackson's conceptual discussion in his contribution to the Special Issues, the ensuing analysis will commence with these two forms before addressing the second and fourth.

Ideological vs Issue-Driven Anti-Government Extremism

Sam Jackson defines anti-government extremism as "instances of extremism that *primarily* or *consistently* focus on government as a source or cause of perceived crises, where that focus on government is central to the worldviews of the actors in question."[29] This definition is useful for

at least two reasons. First, as Jackson argues, it differentiates this form of extremism from other categories that, while focusing on the government, do not do so with a consistent or primary focus, or treat the government as a proxy for a broader target audience.[30] At the same time, this definition accommodates the possibility of AGE coexisting with other extremist ideologies and ideas – e.g., white supremacy, various conspiracy theories, or anti-technology extremism.[31]

Within this conceptualisation, Jackson identifies two sub-categories, namely ideological anti-government extremism, and issue-driven anti-government extremism. The latter primarily objects to a specific government's actions and/or priorities. A change in policies could, therefore, assuage the extremists and their demands for change. Conversely, ideological anti-government extremism remains rooted in the government's fundamental existence as an oppressive, tyrannical, and malevolent actor. It is important to stress that, as Jackson posits, this distinction between ideological and issue-driven AGE "might not be as clean as suggested here (…). Some individuals might be best understood as ideological AGE but at different times express a form of AGE that seems more issue-driven."[32]

Intuitively, one might assume that anarchism aligns closely with this definition. Yet, despite conceding that "it might be reasonable to say that anarchist extremism fits the definition of anti-government extremism," Jackson argues against this notion.[33] While acknowledging that "[a]t a very broad level, it is true that both right-wing anti-government extremists and anarchists oppose the state in important ways," he adds that "anarchist extremists often advocate for a radically inclusive form of governance, perhaps best understood as a non-hierarchical form of direct democracy." Opposed to that, "right-wing anti-government extremists instead typically argue in favour of excluding people from a political community or restricting participation in public life, often for racial, ethnic, or cultural reasons."[34] Therefore, Jackson argues for excluding anarchism from the AGE category noting that including it "blurs the category in unhelpful ways, and we can better understand and explain anarchism by treating it as a concept on its own rather than folding into a broader category alongside right-wing AGE."[35]

There are two problematic assumptions in this argument. First, it treats anarchism as a monolithic political theory, ideology, and philosophy. As the subsequent paragraphs will illustrate, anarchism is diverse and multifaceted.[36] With its different strands come different perspectives on governance. While acknowledging a degree of diversity within the anarchist universe by noting that anarchist extremists *often* "advocate for a radically inclusive form of governance," this portrayal fails to capture the complexity of anarchist tradition and theory. Additionally, promoting certain perspectives on governance does not necessarily diminish or weaken anarchists' anti-government stance. Advocating specific governance models does not imply support for a different form or practice of government. The idea that it is possible to achieve governance without government is not an innovative one and has been explored in various publications, including papers that drew inspiration from the anarchist tradition.[37]

This can be similarly applied to right-wing anti-government extremism, wherein proponents advance distinctive governance ideas rooted in racial, ethnic, or cultural considerations without detracting from their anti-government stance.

Similarly, one could also argue the reverse of Jackson's statement. Treating right-wing extremism as an independent concept – though often displaying, *inter alia*, anti-government sentiments – could potentially enhance the understanding of this milieu. However, as also noted in the introduction to the Special Issues, including anarchism in discussions about anti-government extremism would be beneficial for "comparative reasons as well as for ideological balance."[38] Even more so, since both anarchist and right-wing anti-government extremists share similar positions on various issues, such as opposition to COVID-19 restrictions and vaccines, as well as 5G and other emerging technologies.[39]

To his credit, Jackson stresses that his definition of anti-government extremism reflects his "interest in understanding the relatively more mainstream correlates of AGE in the United States" and that, therefore, it "might not be equally helpful for research in other contexts."[40] He then correctly argues that disagreements about a definition are not necessarily a problem as long as researchers agree on the core concept of anti-government extremism.[41] Yet, this is not a matter of conflicting characteristics; rather, it is about arguing that anarchism can be comprehended and analysed within Jackson's conceptual framework, provided certain misconceptions about anarchism are rectified. This naturally leads to the subsequent point of discussion: understanding anarchism and its place within the landscape of anti-government extremism.

What is Anarchism? What is Anarchist Anti-Government Extremism?

As previously mentioned, anarchism is a complex and multifaceted ideology. The following quote – from an anarchist's document published online – eloquently captures this diversity within anarchism:

> *To call yourself an anarchist is to invite identification with an unpredictable array of associations, an ensemble which is unlikely to mean the same thing to any two people, including any two anarchists. (The most predictable is the least accurate: the bomb-thrower. But anarchists have thrown bombs, and some still do.)*[42]

This quote effectively highlights crucial aspects of contemporary anarchism, namely the diverse nature of anarchism and its contradictory stances on violence. Indeed, it suggests that there is ample room for disagreement among anarchists. The author goes on to note that anarchists are "at odds over work, industrialism, unionism, urbanism, science, sexual freedom, religion and much more which is more important, especially when taken together, than anything that unites

them."[43] In the words of Borum and Tilby, "the nuances are myriad and complex."[44] In fact, "[e]ver since anarchism was born in the nineteenth century as an ideology and a political and social movement, it has meant many different things, both to its supporters and to its opponents."[45] Anarchists "are notorious for disagreeing with each other"; a natural tendency towards dissent "for people whose fundamental principle is the rejection of authority."[46] Therefore, anarchism can be conceived as "a set of overlapping and sometimes competing traditions or aspects rather than a general theory or coherent ideology" and is also "characterized by the continual capacity to redefine and reconfigure itself."[47] According to Purkis and Bower, one of the main reasons behind the endurance of anarchism is "the fact that regardless of context it asks challenging questions about the nature of power."[48]

Yet, despite these differences, there are still essential characteristics that can be identified within anarchism. At its core, anarchism rejects the legitimacy of the state and authorities.[49] In other words, anarchists do not "oppose *who* is in power, but they generally oppose the notion that *anyone* is in power."[50] However, anarchists disagree on what constitutes the best approach or strategy to destroy the current existing structures and on the ways that the revolution should unfold.[51] In this regard, a major bone of contention lies in the legitimacy of the resort to violence. While many ascribe to non-violent resistance and pacifism, some anarchists justify violence against property and/or individuals.[52] This divergence has accompanied anarchism since its very inception. Already back in 1894, for example, as the world reacted with shock at the bombings and assassinations perpetrated by the anarchists, Errico Malatesta – a major proponent of the resort to violence – argued that while "the Anarchist Idea (…) is by its very nature opposed to violence," the employment of physical force was inevitable to fight the "legions of soldiers and police (…) ready to massacre and imprison anyone who will not meekly submit to the laws which a handful of privileged persons have made in their own interests."[53] These contrasting positions on the legitimacy of violence serve as a powerful reminder that anarchism is not a monolithic ideology and that various strands exist within it. Some examples include Green Anarchism, Anarcho-Primitivism, Anarcha-Feminism, Anarcho-Communism, Anarcho-Individualism, and Anarcho-Syndicalism. However, for the purpose of this discussion, this article will primarily focus on Insurrectionary Anarchism – a subset of anarchism that stands out for its commitment to violence and revolutionary insurrection. This strand of anarchism is often associated with violent actions against property, sabotage, bombings, and occasionally more serious forms of violence.[54] It is important to note that these strands can overlap and intersect – i.e., an insurrectionary anarchist can espouse anarcho-primitivist ideas or subscribe to anarcho-individualism. For the remaining discussion, the terms insurrectionary anarchism and anarchism will be used interchangeably unless otherwise specified.

Going back to Jackson's definition, this article contends that anarchism aligns with both ideological and issue-driven anti-government extremism. With respect to ideological AGE, the government is viewed as the root cause of all the conditions that allow for oppressive and

hierarchical relationships of power within society. These relationships are primarily maintained through violence, and – according to the more extremist interpretations of anarchism – it is with violence that they must be destroyed. The opposition to the government is not only expressed against its repressive institutions such as the police, prisons, the law, the armed forces etc. but also against those institutions that are "apparently benevolent – subsidised bodies and local councils, nationalised industries and public corporations, banks and insurance companies, schools and universities, press and broadcasting (…)."[55] As such, there can be rather broad interpretations of what constitutes government. However, anarchist AGE is also driven by specific issues. Anarchists mobilise around certain issues, such as COVID-19 restrictions,[56] the abolition of the prison system,[57] the environment,[58] the rise of far-right political parties and organisations,[59] and technological progress.[60]

Therefore, ideological anti-government extremism represents the *raison d'être* of anarchist anti-government extremism. So long as there will be governments, there will be anarchist anti-government extremism. At the same time, specific issues contribute to the fluctuation and mobilisation of anarchist AGE. For example, a wave of anarchist violence has recently swept Italy along with other countries, including Greece, Spain, Chile, Germany, and Argentina. The *casus belli* was provided by Alfredo Cospito, a prominent anarchist and militant of the Informal Anarchist Federation. Cospito – who has been imprisoned since 2012 – launched a hunger strike to protest the imposition of a particular prison regime system. Building upon their long-standing opposition to the criminal justice system as a constitutive part of their anti-government stance, anarchists launched a series of demonstrations and attacks against the Italian government both domestically and abroad in solidarity with Cospito.[61]

All in all, in maintaining that ideological AGE represents the *raison d'être* of anarchism whereas specific issues provide the necessary *casus belli* for mobilisation, Jackson's categorisation helps to make sense of anarchist anti-government extremism at a conceptual level while also highlighting how the two categories intertwine at the practical one. Before moving on to analysing the two remaining forms of anarchist AGE, it is necessary to provide a brief discussion on the main characteristics of anarchist anti-government violence and *modus operandi*. This will not only substantiate the above discussion but also provide context for the following sections.

Hallmarks of Insurrectionary Anarchism

Generally speaking, a few hallmarks characterise anarchist extremism. First, its operational and organisational principles resemble leaderless resistance, emphasising decentralised actions without hierarchical leadership or a network of support.[62] Despite this lack of central organisation, informal leaders may emerge to provide general ideological guidance, specific and/or general targets of interest, or even technical information without assuming any formal role.[63] In addition to this leaderless nature, anarchists emphasise the recourse to direct actions as a means to achieve their goals.[64] Associated with the concept of "propaganda of the deed",

direct actions can be conceived as a series of practices of protest and resistance against societal structures, individuals, and/or positions of power;[65] "[t]hrough unmediated action, oppressed individuals and groups attempt to overturn or destroy that which subjects them."[66] Direct actions can range from non-violent tactics to more confrontational and, at times, violent ones.[67] Anarchists also organise into affinity groups. Emerging at the end of the 19th century in the Spanish anarchist movement, an affinity group "is an autonomous militant unit (…) who share a sense of the cause worth defending and of the types of actions they prefer to engage in."[68] In doing so, however, they do not act as a revolutionary vanguard, which would essentially be a form of hierarchical structure and command.[69] When the need arises, informal organisations can emerge as a means to coordinate affinity groups.[70] The informal organisation thus represents a form of coordination that "lacks the formality and authority which separate organisers and organised."[71] Communication between affinity groups within informal organisations is carried out primarily in an indirect way – that is, through direct actions and the related communiqués published on anarchist blogs and websites.[72] Any affinity group or individual can launch a campaign and explain its rationale through communiqués. Other affinity groups can then decide whether to join the campaign or not.[73] Usually, these campaigns develop along a two-level approach. This consists of a movementist approach – i.e., infiltration of public demonstration and promotion of more antagonistic forms of struggle – and a clandestine one, including covert direct actions.[74] It must be noted that, while anarchists popularised this organisational form, affinity groups have spread well beyond the boundaries of insurrectionary anarchism. Several activist groups have indeed adopted them without being necessarily infiltrated by anarchists or without promoting illegitimate forms of protests and activism.[75]

When it comes to the movementist approach, a prominent representative is Antifa, an anti-fascist "militant, non-hierarchical, geographically dispersed social movement comprised of local autonomous groups."[76] Antifa militants are often involved in street protests which may involve the targeted destruction of property, vandalism, and ransacking.[77] In doing so, they resort to *black blocs* tactics – militants wearing black clothing and masks to conceal their identities. Originating in the West German Autonomous Movement of the 1980s, this tactic has become a hallmark of anti-fascist and anarchist street fights and demonstrations across the globe,[78] in particular following the 1999 Battle of Seattle at the World Trade Organisation conference.[79] Other than preventing the identification of individual militants by the authorities or other opponents, black blocs are also used to de-arrest militants who are apprehended during street fighting by trying and overwhelming the police to remove their comrades from detention.[80] Thus, social movements – defined as "informal networks, based on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about conflictual issues, trough the frequent use of various forms of protest"[81] – represent a vibrant component of anti-government extremism, a fact also evidenced by some of the case studies discussed in the Special Issue (such as the article on the Reichsbürger). Yet, there is an important distinction to make here between activist movements that promote participation in normative political actions – such as lawful and/or non-violent

methods – and extremist movements that promote violence or a mixture of violent and non-violent strategies.[82] While many anarchists are involved in non-violent demonstrations or political actions, anarchist movements such as Antifa do promote the resort to violence, thus contributing to delegitimising their struggle.

When adopting the clandestine approach, instead, anarchist violence relies on a repertoire of tactics which includes arson, sabotage, assault, bombings, shootings, damage against property, and (less frequently) murder.[83] While anarchist violence rarely results in fatalities, some militants advocate for more extreme and nihilistic positions.[84] Additionally, operational capabilities are generally low – i.e., anarchists rarely resort to spectacular or complex *modi operandi.* The most sophisticated attacks are carried out using rudimentary improvised explosive devices or improvised incendiary devices.[85] Occasionally, certain cells might display a more sophisticated *modus operandi* – in particular, in the main hotbeds of Italy and Greece – but this remains the exception.[86] The most prominent of such clandestine organisations is the Informal Anarchist Federation – International Revolutionary Front (FAI-FRI, *Federazione Anarchica Informale – Fronte Rivoluzionario Internazionale*). Emerging in 2003 in Italy, the FAI has grown to become what is likely the world's largest anarchist network and the one that claims the highest number of attacks. In 2011, it underwent an internationalisation process with the establishment of the International Revolutionary Front. From then on, cells would usually sign with the acronym FAI-FRI. The FAI-FRI has claimed responsibility for attacks conducted in many countries, including Italy, Greece, Spain, Germany, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, Chile, Brazil, and Mexico.[87]

Another major anarchist organisation is the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire (CCF, *Συνωμοσία Πυρήνων της Φωτιάς* – sometimes also translated as Conspiracy of the Fire Nuclei). Established in 2008 in Greece, the CCF has been responsible for the 2010 series of parcel bombs sent to European political leaders and foreign embassies along with numerous other actions involving bombings and incendiary devices targeting government buildings and representatives as well as law enforcement and bans.[88] Some of these attacks have also resulted in casualties other than property damage. CCF supported the launch of the FAI-FRI and, in general, it is believed to have operational links with the Informal Anarchist Federation.[89]

While some anarchists do not use acronyms or claim responsibility for attacks, other groups include Rouvikonas (*Ρουβίκωνας*), the Nucleus of Opposition to the System (*Núcleo de Oposição ao Sistema*), the Sect of Revolutionaries (*Σέχτα των Επαναστατών*), the Organisation for Revolutionary Self-Defence (Οργανισμός Επαναστατικής Αυτοάμυνας), the International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces, and the Antagonic Nuclei of the New Urban Guerrilla (*Núcleos Antagónicos de la Nueva Guerrilla Urbana*). This list is quite reductive and includes only major networks and organisations. Typically, smaller cells claim affiliation with a larger one – in particular, the FAI-FRI and CCF – when carrying out attacks.[90]

In summary, anarchism is a diverse ideology with differing perspectives on violence. Anarchists fundamentally reject hierarchical power structures and government authority while also mobilising around specific issues. Their operational principles involve leaderless resistance, direct actions, and affinity groups. While anarchist violence tends to avoid fatalities and is generally low-tech, it employs a range of tactics often coordinated by loose informal organisations. This multifaceted nature of anarchism is instrumental in understanding the two remaining expressions of AGE identified by Bjørgo and Braddock, namely the forms associated with conspiracy theories and attacks against politicians and government representatives.

Anarchism and Conspiracy Theories

Overall, conspiracy theories have been positively associated with willingness to, or justifications for, the resort to violence.[91] In particular, they have risen to prominence in the narrative and ideologies of several right-wing extremist groups and individuals.[92] Similarly, conspiracy theories have also found a place within anarchist extremist circles, even though in a less pervasive and ubiquitous fashion when compared to far-right milieus.[93] Unlike certain highly structured and catchy conspiracy theories prevalent on the far right – e.g., the Great Replacement Theory, Eurabia, Zionist Occupation Government, or QAnon – anarchist conspiracy theories do often appear less organised, less coherent, and more open to the interpretation of the individual militants with some going as far as openly rejecting them. To some extent, this milieu tends to lean more towards conspiracy thinking, rather than fully articulated conspiracy theories. Nonetheless, such conspiracy thinking does provide powerful narrative devices that can contribute to guiding anarchist direct actions thereby increasing their impact.

Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic offered fertile ground for conspiracy theories to flourish within the anarchist milieu. For example, Campion et al. showed how anarchist blogs attempted to establish a link between 5G technologies and the Coronavirus pandemic, suggesting that 5G weakened people's immune systems.[94] Additionally, the pandemic was also considered 'an opportunity to justify the introduction of 5G network' since "[f]ear is an ideal feeling to push us even further towards a world where human beings would be governed by 'intelligent objects' and by those who program them."[95] This narrative framed the pandemic response as a means of oppression against the subaltern classes.[96] Subalternity is here conceived in the Gramscian acceptation as the "intersectionality of the variations of race, class, gender, culture, religion, nationalism and colonialism functioning within an ensemble of socio-political and economic relations (…)" which denotes a condition in which "subaltern groups are subordinated to the power, will, influence, leadership, and direction of a dominant group or a 'single combination' of dominant groups."[97]

Related to the pandemic narrative, anti-vaccine sentiments also emerged. On the one hand, some militants questioned the COVID-19 vaccination campaign without resorting to conspiracy tropes.[98] On the other hand, however, others seemed quite comfortable in embracing them.

For example, according to an anonymous writer, it would be naïve to think that the worldwide vaccination programme is just a functional answer to the unforeseen spread of SARS-CoV-2.[99] They argue that so-called folkloric ideas about Bill Gates and population control are "certainly closer to the truth than the progressive illusion according to which techno-scientific development is not only neutral but even a factor of emancipation…"[100] In other words, the vaccination campaign is part and parcel of the elites' project of domination and modern totalitarianism:[101] "the programme to vaccinate billions of people (…) is born out of a similar convergence of powers that declared 'war on terror' to justify bombings. Bombs or vaccines, these are two moves stemming from the same command centres."[102] As discussed at the Fifth International Meeting Three Days Against Techno-Sciences held in Italy at the end of July 2023, vaccines are also associated with infertility, cancer, and genetic engineering.[103] Interestingly, some anarchists find it ironic that such considerations can be labelled as a conspiracy theory viewing it as part of the elites' own conspiracy to discredit the revolutionaries as enemies of collective health.[104]

Anarchist conspiracy theories extend beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and often tie into the broader narrative about the role of technology in society. In particular, some anarchists believe that emerging technologies are enabling the state and the elites to establish a *prison society*, wherein the subaltern classes are permanently enslaved.[105] These theories contend that nation-states cannot adapt to the new technological landscape without relinquishing their democratic pretences.[106] Consequently, "[t]he post-industrial nation-states are at risk, and are increasingly revealing their own developed and connected prison-society projects; the ascendant form of power relations backed by the multinational corporations."[107] Communication technologies, medicine, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence and other technologies are all contributing to this new form of totalitarianism.[108]

Actions stemming from these conspiracy theories include attacks on vaccination centres, telecommunications infrastructure, health institutes, research facilities, and technology-related companies. Anarchist extremists have carried out these attacks as a response to their beliefs about the implications of modern technologies and the perceived control exerted by the state and corporations.[109]

Summing up, conspiracy theories have become part of the narrative within anarchist extremist circles, influencing their direct actions and mobilisation strategies. These theories often focus on the role of technology, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While they are less articulated and coherent when compared to the conspiracy theories that are popular among far-right milieus, they nonetheless offer powerful narrative devices and contribute to shaping the anarchists' worldview and tactics.

Anarchism and Actions Against Politicians and/or Governmental Representatives

Finally, anarchist anti-government extremism has historically manifested in the form of attacks and harassment against politicians and governmental representatives. The first wave of modern terrorism – the anarchist wave – saw numerous bombings in the 19th century. However, its main hallmark lay in the series of assassinations that targeted monarchs, heads of state, and heads of government.[110] This period, also referred to as the Golden Age of Assassination, witnessed the death of prominent figures such as Russian Czar Alexander II (1881), French President Carnot (1894), Spanish Premier Canovas (1897), Austrian Empress Elizabeth (1898), Italy's King Umberto I (1900), and US President McKinley (1901).[111] These high-profile assassinations undoubtedly marked a significant chapter in the history of anarchist violence.

While contemporary anarchist violence against politicians and governmental representatives may not reach the same level of intensity as the assassinations of the past, it remains a significant concern in many countries. The methods and targets have evolved, reflecting changes in society and the security landscape. Parcel bombs have been used to target political offices, as well as foreign embassies, politicians, and military bases. While the frequency of assassinations and the intensity of assaults are notably lower today, they still occur, particularly in Southern Europe and Latin America.[112] The historical context of the Golden Age of Assassination serves as a backdrop to the ongoing challenges posed by anarchist anti-government extremism. While the contemporary landscape may be less lethal, the persistence of attacks against politicians and government representatives underscores the enduring nature of anarchist movements and their continued impact on the political sphere. The subsequent paragraphs will now provide a few examples to epitomise the type of violence described here while also enriching and giving substance to the above claim.

Upon entering the stage of political violence in 2003, the Informal Anarchist Federation launched Operation Santa Claus with a series of parcel bombs targeting European Union representatives, senior officials, and institutions, including Romano Prodi who was serving as President of the EU Commission at the time.[113] Greek militants of the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire followed suit in 2010, similarly targeting EU leaders and embassies with parcel bombs.[114] Anarchist groups often direct their attacks at foreign embassies as also seen with the FAI's bombings of the Swiss and Chilean embassies in Rome which resulted in two employees being injured.[115] More recently, as the anarchist wave of solidarity with Alfredo Cospito propagated across the globe, Italian embassies, consulates, and diplomats were attacked in multiple countries, including Germany, Chile, Greece, and Argentina.[116] Similarly, Indonesia experienced an attack – undertaken in solidarity with Cospito – on a local parliament building in Bandung in April 2023.[117]

In addition to high-profile targets, lower-ranking figures also face anarchist aggression. In Greece, anarchist formations have repeatedly assaulted members of the neo-Nazi party Golden

Dawn. Some of these attacks resulted in injuries or death.[118] In Chile, instead, anarchists have broken into the homes of police officers to attack them, while the Brazilian Nucleus of Opposition to the System has doxed prominent military leaders and government officials as part of their campaign.[119]

Italy has also seen anarchists targeting judges and public prosecutors.[120] While these targets do not necessarily represent the government, *stricto sensu*, they are seen as part of the broader criminal justice system and thus implicated in the functioning of the government. As discussed above, anarchists have a rather broad understanding of what constitutes the government and, therefore, institutions like the criminal justice system are considered complicit in maintaining hierarchical power structures. Additionally, some attacks take on a symbolic rather than purely destructive nature. The Greek anarchist group Rouvikonas, for example, engages in paint-throwing attacks against government targets such as embassies or personal offices of ministers. These actions carry a strong symbolic message and seek to publicly demonstrate opposition to the government and its representatives.[121] While the actions of Rouvikonas tend to target governmental property rather than actual governmental representatives, the intended audience of such actions remains politicians and governments. For example, in 2019, Rouvikonas vandalised the private office of Education Minister Niki Kerameus after the government lifted a ban that prevented law enforcement officers from entering university campuses.[122] Therefore, violence against governmental property becomes a means to attempt to intimidate, coerce, or protest politicians and governmental representatives.

As mentioned previously, these anti-government direct actions against politicians and/or government representatives are no match when compared to the 19th century series of assassinations that decapitated several Western governments. One might speculate that both the lower propensity for bloodshed among contemporary anarchists and the state's more efficient means of control and repression have contributed to these qualitative differences in violence. However, this discussion – and the handful of examples that come with it – shows how anarchist anti-government extremism finds different expressions when it comes to attacks on politicians and/or government representatives. While a few of these actions still result in casualties or (more frequently) in property damage, their persistence is indicative of a lingering threat that anarchists pose to democratic institutions and politicians – a threat which, in line with the trends that characterised the second decade of the 20th century, could continue to escalate.[123]

In summary, contemporary anarchist anti-government extremism encompasses a diverse array of targets, including not only high-profile politicians but also individuals associated with law enforcement, the military, legal institutions, and even those aligned with perceived oppressive ideologies. This multifaceted targeting reflects the broader anarchist perspective that views various individuals and institutions as complicit in maintaining an oppressive system.

Conclusion

As discussed throughout this article, anarchist anti-government extremism has not been relegated to the past. While its magnitude and *modus operandi* have changed over the decades, anarchist AGE still represents a dynamic and relevant phenomenon. The objective of this analysis was to provide an overview of anarchist anti-government extremism and, ideally, reverse the general trend when it comes to the lack of scholarly engagement with this topic. As initially noted, numerous dimensions within this phenomenon warrant more comprehensive exploration; this article, however, offers an introductory overview.

Using the framework and conceptual discussion provided in the Special Issues, this article argued that anarchism constitutes both a form of ideological and issue-driven anti-government extremism. As anarchists fundamentally consider them the root of all evil, they strive to abolish any hierarchical and oppressive relationships of power crystallised in the idea of state and government. However, in their praxis, anarchists tend to be more reactive rather than proactive and, therefore, their lines of intervention, or campaign, develop along different issues ranging from the environment to the rise of far-right parties and technological progress. Occasionally, conspiracy theories play a role in shaping their narrative of insurrectionary anarchists surrounding these issues. Having said that, anarchist conspiracy theories are usually less structured and less pervasive compared to those found in far-right groups, such as Reichsbürger or QAnon. Nonetheless, they can still exert considerable appeal among anarchist extremists and inform their direct actions.

Finally, anarchist AGE has also found a powerful expression through targeted attacks and harassment directed at politicians and government representatives. While contemporary instances might not parallel the Golden Age of Assassination witnessed in the 19th century, the trend persists, especially in regions like Southern Europe and Latin America. Notably, these attacks also encompass lower-ranking targets, including members of specific political parties, law enforcement officials, and judicial figures. These actions align with anarchists' broad perception of what constitutes an oppressive government, thus expanding their range of targets.

Overall, as evidenced throughout this article, insurrectionary anarchism represents a serious security issue in several countries. Anarchist attacks occasionally result in considerable financial and economic damage, disruption, and (more rarely) casualties. Now, when compared to the more striking and more lethal attacks perpetrated by far-right or Jihadist groups and individuals, it is perhaps natural to consider insurrectionary anarchists a lesser threat. After all, how can one compare massacres like the 2015 Paris attacks or the 2011 Norway attacks with the actions of the anarchists? Yet measuring the seriousness of a security threat entirely or largely on the scale of physical destruction and the number of victims of the attacks can be

misleading. For example, in 1972, the Provisional IRA launched hundreds of operations a month – Moloney argues that May 1972 alone saw around 1,200 Provisional IRA operations.[124] 1972 is also the year that recorded the highest number of victims during the Irish Troubles.[125] Twenty years later, on 10 April 1992, the PIRA bombed the Baltic Exchange in London in an attack that caused three deaths, ninety-one injured, and damage worth 800 million pounds – which was, McGladdery argues, worth the combined effect of 10,000 bombs in Northern Ireland.[126] When did, then, the Provisional IRA constitute a more serious threat? In 1972, when it reached the peak of its activity, or in 1992 when its actions had considerable economic and financial consequences? Arguably, these are two different forms of security threats or other ways to look at them. It goes without saying that the loss of even just one life is an irreparable tragedy, but the magnitude of a security threat is not necessarily linked to its lethality. Terrorism itself, as a phenomenon, rarely constitutes an existential threat, and yet it is often portrayed as such.[127] Furthermore, the above-mentioned Cospito affair shows that insurrectionary anarchism's potential for societal conflict and violence can thrive when polarising issues are at stake – in this case, the special prison regime system. Having said that, this article is not trying to suggest that insurrectionary anarchism should be securitised or that extraordinary measures should be implemented against it. If anything, the Cospito affair shows that the heavy hand of the Italian justice system contributed significantly to escalating the situation.[128] As always, a proportioned approach that does not overemphasise a military response and that adheres to democratic principles and the rule of law should be the cornerstone of every counterterrorism strategy.[129]

In conclusion, the article's contribution lies not only in highlighting the ongoing relevance of anarchist anti-government extremism but also in underscoring the need for rigorous academic examination of this phenomenon. By incorporating anarchism into the discourse on anti-government extremism, a more comprehensive understanding can emerge. Furthermore, the potential for comparative studies between different extremist ideologies, such as far-right and anarchist extremism, offers an avenue to explore intersections and overlaps on specific issues like COVID-19 responses. Additionally, delving deeper into contemporary anarchism's intricacies, including aspects like data scarcity and the presence of anarchist foreign fighters, holds promise for enriching our knowledge of this field.

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Perspectives on Terrorism

Established in 2007, *Perspectives on Terrorism* (PT) is a quarterly, peer-reviewed, and open-access academic journal. PT is a publication of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), in partnership with the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) at Leiden University, and the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at the University of St Andrews.

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