

Interview with Jürgen Mümken

Conducted and translated by Gabriel Kuhn*

Jürgen Mümken lives in Kassel, Germany, works in a print shop, and is an anarchist theorist focusing on postmodernity and poststructuralism. He also writes about housing policies, related to his former studies of architecture at the University of Kassel, and he edits the *Libertäre Bibliothek*, a series of libertarian novels published by the German anarchist press Edition AV.

While the German-speaking world saw the first explicit connections between anarchism and postmodern/post-structuralist theory in the 1970's, most notably with the anarchist bookstore *Rhizom* in Berlin, the term *post-anarchismus* was not used before Jürgen Mümken introduced it in the mid-2000's. Mümken's 2003 book *Freiheit, Individualität und Subjektivität. Staat und Subjekt in der Postmoderne aus anarchistischer Perspektive* [*Liberty, Individuality, and Subjectivity: State and Subject in Postmodernity from an Anarchist Perspective*] remains the most ambitious theoretical application of postmodern/poststructuralist thought for the German anarchist movement. Mümken also edited the influential 2005 anthology *Anarchismus in der Postmoderne. Beiträge zur anarchistischen Theorie und Praxis* [*Anarchism in Postmodernity: Contributions to Anarchist Theory and Praxis*], and he maintains the website postanarchismus.net.

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His political background in the German autonomous movement and his academic background in architecture sets Mümken apart from other prominent representatives of postanarchism, many of whom are strongly rooted in the social sciences. Mümken's understanding of postanarchism differs, at times significantly, from notions of postanarchism in the Anglophone world. Gabriel Kuhn, who himself has worked on the intersections of postmodern/poststructuralist theory and anarchism, albeit from a more critical perspective, interviewed Jürgen Mümken for *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* in the fall of 2012.

KUHN: You are the most prominent postanarchist theorist in the German-speaking world. What does “postanarchism” mean to you and when did you start using the term?

MÜMKEN: In order to answer the question, I have to go back to the early 1990's when I was studying architecture. While doing work on prison architecture and its history, I discovered Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Through Foucault I became interested in philosophy. When, during the winter of 1996-97, I wrote a Master's thesis entitled *Die Ordnung des Raumes. Die Foucaultsche Machtanalyse und die Transformation des Raumes in der Moderne* [*The Order of Space: Foucault's Analysis of Power and the Transformation of Space in Modernity*], I had reached a point where I wanted to link Foucault to anarchism. As a byproduct of my thesis, I wrote an article entitled “Keine Macht für Niemand. Versuch einer anarchistischen Aneignung des philosophischen Projektes von Michel Foucault” [“No Power for No One: An Attempt to Link the Philosophical Project of Michel Foucault to Anarchism”], which was published in the anarchist quarterly *Schwarzer Faden* [*Black Thread*] in 1998. This is when my thorough study of poststructuralism and, especially, of Foucault began, eventually leading to the publication of my 2003 book *Freiheit, Individualität und Subjektivität. Staat und Subjekt in der Postmoderne aus anarchistischer Perspektive*.

At some point after the book's release, I discovered a 1999 university paper online, entitled “Anarchismus in den USA und Deutschland” [“Anarchism in the USA and Germany”]. It stated that my work built on Todd May's and that I had used Judith Butler's deconstructivism to show that an anarchist society “is not characterized by the absence of power, but by keeping power structures flexible and preventing them from turning into fixed structures of domination,” as I wrote in “Keine Macht für Niemand.” However, I had never heard of Todd May. Doing some

more online research, I saw that the North American anarchist Jason Adams was looking for information on two German-speaking anarchists, namely Jens Kastner, who had written a book about the libertarian aspects in Zygmunt Bauman's sociology, and me. That was the first time I encountered the term "postanarchism." The year was 2004. I continued my research and discovered the work of Saul Newman, Lewis Call, and Richard Day, as well as, and this was particularly important, the Turkish website *postanarki.net*, which gave me the idea to create a website for the German-speaking world. So, basically, I've been using the term "postanarchism" since 2005. For me, it indicates a label that is useful to spread new ideas and does not stand for a new current within anarchism. Postanarchism is a certain way of looking at things and of shedding new light on them. It opens up space to analyze social conditions, to question anarchist "truths," and, if necessary, to modify or abandon them.

KUHN: What are some of the key poststructuralist ideas that can inspire anarchism? What's the focus of your book *Freiheit, Individualität und Subjektivität*?

MÜMKEN: There are many ways in which poststructuralism can inspire anarchism. In my work, Foucault is central, in particular his analysis of power, that is, his rejection of the "repressive hypothesis," his claim that there is "no outside of power," and that he does not see power as purely negative, but also as productive. For me, an anarchist society is not characterized by the absence of power but, as I have hinted at above, by preventing shifting relations of power from becoming fixed conditions of domination. When conditions of domination are abolished, new fields of power emerge, which will then have to be kept in check by "practices of freedom," as Foucault puts it. Power and freedom are social relations that are co-dependent—you can't have one without the other. I also think that Foucault's analysis of neoliberal governmentality is important in order to understand contemporary capitalism, its effects on people, and the reasons why there is so little resistance. Likewise, Derrida's concept of deconstruction is important, and feminist poststructuralism inspired by Judith Butler and gender studies. The list goes on. Poststructuralism is full of interesting tools.

The central themes of *Freiheit, Individualität und Subjektivität* are the agency of the state and the question of the subject. I have looked at anarchist and Marxist state theory and analyzed the subject between heteronomy and autonomy. Stirner plays an

important role. I have approached his work from a post-structuralist perspective. I wrote the book mainly because I wanted to clarify a few things for myself. The departure point was the question that Deleuze and Guattari ask in *Anti-Oedipus*: Why do so many people fight for their oppression as if they were fighting for their salvation? I have not found an answer, but we have to address the question if we want to build a liberated society. Maybe my book can make a small contribution. After all, the question goes back to the mid-16th-century *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* by Etienne de la Boétie.

KUHN: In the English-speaking world, for example in the work of Todd May or Saul Newman, it seems important to distinguish postanarchism from “classical anarchism,” most commonly associated with Bakunin and Kropotkin. Where do you see the place of postanarchism in anarchist history? You have done a lot of work on Bakunin.

MÜMKEN: I never intended to distance myself from classical anarchism. All I’m interested in is to update anarchist theory and practice. This, however, I deem necessary. Contemporary anarchist debate must reflect on the social transformations, theoretical developments, and practical experiences of the last decades. I consider postanarchism to be a part of this process. Bakunin and Kropotkin are still very important to me—Bakunin as a radical philosopher and Kropotkin as an anarcho-communist visionary. At the same time, both must be investigated critically in order to tease out the best of their ideas and to develop them further.

KUHN: Another difference between your understanding of postanarchism and that of others seems to lie in your view of anarcho-syndicalism. While some postanarchists see anarcho-syndicalism as a product of the classical era, neglecting non-economic forms of oppression, you have close ties to the German anarcho-syndicalists in the *Freie ArbeiterInnen-Union* (Free Workers’ Union, FAU). How do you see the relationship between postanarchism and anarcho-syndicalism?

MÜMKEN: In the early 1990’s, I briefly worked with the Kassel chapter of the FAU, but I was never a member. At the time, my ideas of political practice were closer to the autonomous movement, especially because anti-fascism was a priority. After the so-called “reunification” of Germany, racist attacks were a daily reality. Ever since I got interested in anarchism at the age of 18,

communist anarchism was my utopia, and I have always seen anarcho-syndicalism as a means to reach it. However, during the last thirty years I have repeatedly redefined my understanding of communist anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism. In my opinion, an organization that focuses exclusively on economic struggles is no real anarcho-syndicalist organization. Anarcho-syndicalism means first and foremost to eradicate the liberal division of politics and economics. (Unfortunately, the workers' movement adopted this division by organizing in parties on the one hand and in unions on the other.) An anarcho-syndicalist organization needs to be involved in anti-fascist, anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, anti-nuclear, anti-genetic engineering, and anti-landlord struggles. But it also has to adapt to the neoliberal transformation of labor. Social struggles do not only occur at the workplace, but also in neighborhoods, where they are directed against processes of gentrification, rent increase, and poor living conditions. I think that anarcho-syndicalism can benefit from postanarchist thought, especially regarding processes of subjectification in neoliberal global capitalism and regarding the rejection of all forms of identity politics. As I said before, this is not about distancing oneself from the anarchist tradition, it is about renewing it. Anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist theory and practice are constantly "becoming," and this process never ends.

KUHN: You are a trained architect and you have done much work on housing and urban planning, theoretically and practically. Can you tell us a little more about how this relates to postanarchist themes? The question of space is much discussed among post-structuralist theorists and has apparently played an important role in your own discovery of poststructuralism.

MÜMKEN: Just for clarification: it is true that I studied architecture and that I got my degree, but since I have never worked as an architect, I am not allowed to call myself an architect according to German law. Right now, I do very "classical" anarchist work as a printer in a print shop. It is hard for me to even distinguish between studying space and poststructuralism, because it was through Foucault and his analysis of power that I first combined the notions of the city, space, and housing with those of postanarchism. It is crucial to understand, even if it seems trivial, that all social struggles happen in time and space. It is important for these struggles that space in itself does not exist. Space is produced by social conditions. Capitalism produces space, patriarchy produces space, laws produce space. This also means that

struggles intervene in the production of space. Spaces are contested, and the struggles are not merely economic, but also cultural and symbolic. Right now, I am studying the “society of control,” as Deleuze called it. In such a society, control is executed in space and through space. It is no longer necessary to keep each individual under surveillance, as in a disciplinary society. “Space” is therefore an important analytical category. When we talk about the relationship between society and space, we ought remember that the French geographer and anarchist Élisée Reclus belonged to the founders of social geography in the second half of the 19th century; unfortunately, this is somewhat neglected in anarchism today, while much interesting work on society and space has been done in Marxism, for example by Henri Lefebvre who coined the phrase “right to the city,” which has sparked urban protest movements worldwide.

KUHN: Can you give us a short overview of the current anarchist movement in Germany? Are your postanarchist ideas well received? Do you meet rejection?

MÜMKEN: I am no expert as far as the contemporary anarchist movement in Germany is concerned. The FAU probably has a bit over 300 members, and then there are the non-violent anarchists around the journal *graswurzel-revolution* [*Grassroots Revolution*], as well as many local and regional anarchist groups and projects, active in various social movements. Younger anarchists are interested in postanarchist ideas; that is obvious whenever I give talks. Of course there is also critique, but that’s the way it should be. I mainly wish for a productive debate on anarchist theory and practice. Personally, I haven’t encountered much rejection, rather disinterest and a lack of understanding. Some folks think that postanarchism is too abstract, too academic, too theoretical. Others consider the critique of the “autonomous subject” problematic, since it is the foundation of their anarchist politics and utopias.

KUHN: What are the future possibilities for anarchism, both in Germany and internationally?

MÜMKEN: Anarchism certainly won’t be a mass movement anytime soon. But it will remain the current within the left that pursues change most radically. The change I would like to see would allow people to live in a society that is truly free. I am not interested in creating my own island of happiness or in retreating

to a rural commune, while leaving the overall social conditions untouched. Whether anarchism will ever contribute more to the change I envision than it does now, I don't know.