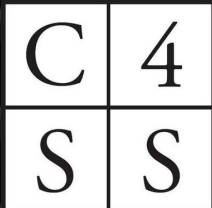




No Citizens *Abolishing Borders Beyond the Nationstate*

Many of us are already engaged in action against borders. On boats in the Mediterranean, in migrant camps throughout Mexico, in the deserts of the southern U.S. border, and at the gates of prisons worldwide, anarchists and anti-authoritarians are fighting for a world with free movement, without nation-states, and without the arbitrary lines they draw across land, families, and individual bodies. As we do this work and dream of futures where real affinity is possible, we must oppose not only the specific borders we face, but the common logic that underpins them. While we can only work from the positions we occupy – region, neighborhood, identity, or community – it is crucial to avoid turning to reactive, reactionary localism at any scale. When we build local communes, we can't allow the logic of the border to seep into our organizing, positioning the commune in opposition to outsiders.



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The very existence of borders is one of the founding injustices of this world. Most of us recognize this implicitly, and I won't spend too much time here trying to argue what's been clearly argued by generations of anarchists: Borders and citizenship are constitutive elements of the nation-state, and as such must be overturned and overcome. Governments depend on the existence of a defined territory in which to exercise a monopoly on force. Likewise, they lay claim to a specific, limited population which they call "citizens" and set against the citizenry of neighboring states. Borders and citizenship define the "outside" against which statist conceptions of identity are always contrasted. Anarchists, then, have two easy angles from which to think about borders. Firstly, the freedom we are working toward necessarily includes freedom of mobility. Secondly, national borders — as constitutive elements of the state — are a powerful target for attack, sites where the impossibility of the nation-state is constantly visible, where migrants and others are constantly undermining state power. While the border is, has been, and hopefully always will be an impossibility, a fiction imposed by state planners on a world much too resistant and messy to be divided in these ways, it is also a key site where the state struggles to impose a particular version of order. It is crucial that we work to undermine both these physical borders and the logics that underpin them.

At this moment, the latest in a long string of state-created “border crises,” along with calls for the abolition of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), has brought forth myriad images of the future of human mobility in North America, both hopeful and totalitarian. Against this backdrop, it’s important not to lose sight of our goals. In the past decades, “the border,” which we imagined as a line in desert dividing the U.S. from Mexico has changed shape, morphing into broad enforcement zones that extend throughout Mexico and far into the U.S. The border is now effectively everywhere, as a sorting device which divides citizens and noncitizens. Since the first U.S. “border policy” was enacted in the Chinese Exclusion Act, this divide has always been about race, and the current frenzy around citizenship and belonging is no different. In the U.S., the border is at work in every airport, in freeway checkpoints far from any territorial boundary, in ICE bus sweeps and workplace raids – and of course in the hands of the police as they cooperate with immigration enforcement. In some places, border controls can also be activated through obligatory and seemingly innocuous bureaucratic procedures: Meetings with school officials, hospital administrators, and other elements of the state become opportunities for control. When we say we’re against borders, we of course mean that we oppose all of this – that we work against the whole apparatus that divides those inside a line from those outside it.

This much, at least, should not be controversial. Going further, however, it must be emphasized that to undermine the national border is not enough. This is harder for many people, anarchists and otherwise, to recognize: Localism has a powerful hold on the Left, and responses to the exclusions inherent in citizenship often rest on the assertion of (local) belonging for migrants. However,

and “them.” While we all must fight where we stand, it must be recognized that none of us stand in places that are not touched by vast networks of exploitation reaching around the world, and that if we want to win, our actions must allow this fact to shape the directions our struggles take.

- **Translation:** There is no shortage of anarchist translation projects distributing texts internationally, but it is important to recognize the importance of building a broader culture of translation in the sense of working messily across difference, both linguistic and otherwise. Too often, “translation” is taken to mean an alchemical project taken on only by experts, by which crystallized meaning is transmuted as directly as possible from one purified and refined language to another. As anarchists, we need to shake this idea off. Translation in the sense we should strive for is the kind of messy communication that happens when we work together, attempting to understand and make ourselves understood, building a new language together in the process. Translation, undertaken as work across boundaries, is an invaluable tool in undermining both the logic of the border in its physical and political manifestations.

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- **Affinity:** Anarchists have been organizing along the lines of free association based on affinity for centuries. This is a well-worn concept, but it is also one that offers a powerful critique of the impulse to build and defend a stable, inflexible, and centralized organization which is to be defended against “outsiders” who can be assumed to have less stake in the piece of conceptual, cultural, or physical space occupied by a given project. At its best, organization based on affinity allows for open collaboration that recognizes and allows for difference. By focusing not on the valuation of group-members and devaluation of non-members, but rather on a simple question of affinity (or not) to the group’s common aim, the principle of affinity places limits on the ability of an inside-outside hierarchy to form. Ideally, a focus on specific affinities allows organizing to function across difference, and in fact become stronger through diversity. Nevertheless, our organizing often and regrettably fails to live up to these principles.
- **Solidarity:** The classical conception of solidarity—that my liberation is bound up with yours, regardless of distance—is a profound tool for the recognition that the border is impossible. From inside-outside solidarity work by prison abolitionists, to the customary banner drops and spontaneous attacks on embassies in solidarity with anarchist prisoners near and far, to direct solidarity work with migrants braving desert and shipwreck, solidarity work at its best directly builds bridges across borders, and opens communities and projects to the possibility of life in common that is not bounded by conceptions of “us”

our responses to nation-state borders too often propose urban, local, or regional arrangements that recreate the problem at different scales. In contrast, our opposition to borders must be firmly cosmopolitan in the truest sense of the word: Working in opposition to legalized belonging, and in favor of free association and the right to mobility. Anarchists need a real critique of borders at all scales.

NO SANCTUARY: URBAN CITIZENSHIP CAN’T SAVE US

One common response to the rising tides of nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment has been the establishment of certain urban centers as “sanctuary” cities. Often, this includes promises of non-cooperation with federal immigration enforcement on the part of local police, and may also include the provision of identifying documentation to noncitizens and undocumented people intended to enable smooth interactions with the local state. In some cases, state, city, or university governments make explicit attempts to make undocumented populations unintelligible to state authorities by ensuring that they are undistinguishable from the documented population. At the same time, pledges of noncooperation are seldom as comprehensive as they could be. Moments like the [Oakland / SF mayor’s official warning of imminent raids](#), the Madison WI mayor’s [less-strong solidarity efforts in 2018](#), or the Chicago mayor’s [recent declaration of noncooperation with immigration authorities](#) are few and far between. Regardless, in many cases local police are compelled by higher legal orders to cooperate with federal enforcement.

It is important to recognize the value in these strategies as policy changes with explicit, positive effects for undocumented people and noncitizens generally: Sanctuary city policies shield many – potentially millions – of undocumented people from immigration

enforcement. At the same time, however, they functionally serve to re-scale citizenship from the nation-state to the city, creating a new conception of urban citizenship. Amidst one of the most hostile legal climates for immigrants in modern history, this may be a strategically valuable move to protect communities pending the total abolition of borders and citizenship. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to clarify that the negative aspects of citizenship are not diminished by their reframing at the local level.

First, it's worth noting that the localization of immigration policy creates local borders and threatens noncitizens and migrants more often it protects them. Migration policy research finds that [70% of locally-created immigration policy is restrictive rather than protective](#). While we like to point to examples of sanctuary, local governments often look for ways to expand or move beyond federal control of immigrants, and often these grassroots responses are more explicitly racist than is possible on the national stage – even under the current regime.

Second, and more importantly, it's crucial to recognize that there is nothing inherent in the nation-state that differentiates it from government taking place at other scales. To illustrate this, it's useful to think beyond U.S. and European state strategies to control migration. While urban China may seem far from the U.S.-Mexico border, the strategies that are currently being employed by the nominally socialist state to “manage” the movement of over 120 million workers – most of whom are coming from poor rural communities – look surprisingly familiar, despite the fact that the migrants in question will likely never cross a nation-state boundary. Migrants, many of whom are moving from impoverished farming communities to urban centers to work in low-paying industries, are a legally separated

those who defined citizenship and its exclusions.

The fact is, it's not as easy as it should be to think about communities that are not based on a fundamental exclusion. This is partly a result of unavoidable issues of difference and distance. These are, currently, both undesirable and impossible to “overcome” or render inoperable. Still, it is easy to fall into the traps of border-thinking, and many of our more practical ideas of participation and community-building often tend to replicate the theoretical underpinnings of state citizenship. Regardless of how cosmopolitan our intentions, the logic of our liberatory strategies are often informed by localism, regionalism, and the construction of (exclusive) community. Despite their attraction and momentary usefulness, these concepts tend to replicate the hierarchies of citizenship, in which the identity of those “inside” a community, collective, commune, or organization is defined through the exclusion of those on the outside.

WORKING BEYOND BORDER LOGICS

There is no single piece of advice or toolkit for building movements, projects, or affinities that fully shake off borders. This is difficult work: On one hand, we aim to multiply difference rather than erase it – anarchist or not, the Zapatista framework of “un mundo en que quepan muchos mundos,” a world that might fit many worlds, carries a lot of water here. On the other hand, we are steadfastly against the creation of a more-intensive world of fractal borders, where balkanized militant subcultures jealously guard minuscule patches of physical or cultural real-estate. In the end, vigilant rejection of the logic of borders and citizenship may be the most powerful tool we have. Beyond these, however, I want to offer a few tools to consider as elements for anarchist action that aims not to replicate the logic of the border.

them *all* down, brick by brick. Just as border abolition is inextricably linked to prison abolition, prison abolition must include justice for the vast diaspora of those who have been separated from their friends, families, and communities by border enforcement. What follows are some preliminary notes on the construction of projects that could strive to undermine—and not to replicate—the world of fractal, interconnected borders that we face now.

ABOLISH CITIZENSHIP, ABOLISH EVERY BORDER

Anti-border work at multiple scales is a core strategic commitment for anarchist organizing. To oppose nation-state borders, however, is not enough. If we hope to build a prefigurative politics – one that begins now to build the new world in the always-crumbling shell of the old – it is necessary to find ways to think beyond the logic of the border. While it's easy and clearly positive to directly attack the physical structure of the border (and really, we should be taking bolt cutters and dynamite to different fences every night until every physical border wall is demolished), the specter of citizenship and belonging haunts many of our conceptions of liberation. In statist political theory, citizenship is largely seen as an unalloyed positive: To be a citizen is to inhabit shared identity that brings “us” together, the foundation of the supposed “social contract,” a set of mutual responsibilities, or even something that has been envisioned as close to anarchist concepts of affinity. Unlike affinity, however, the image of citizenship is impossible without an “outside” for citizens to define themselves against: Those who do not share the same state, those who are not covered by or who decide not to abide by the fiction of a “social contract” based on their own exploitation, or those who have not been considered human by

class, unable to access many core city services including compulsory education and healthcare subsidies.

In late 2017, Beijing embarked on a campaign explicitly focused on driving migrants out of the city, in part by demolishing residential areas with high migrant populations, with minimal warning and no relocation plans. Under existing legal structures, formal urban citizenship in Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangdong is unobtainable for the vast majority of migrants who make up anywhere between 35 and 80 percent of the population of those cities. Even being born in the city is of no help, as second generation migrants retain their parents' status. In the words of a friend, the only viable ways to obtain true urban citizenship are through marriage or by becoming rich. Beyond this contemporary example, there are numerous others – from South African apartheid to the history of redlining in American cities – that demonstrate the feasibility and dire impact of the construction of borders at scales other than that of the nation-state.

At the very least, the existence of bounded cities should give us pause when considering cities as a key scale at which to create liberatory politics. While it is hard to imagine political borders being drawn around San Francisco that could create a full apartheid barrier between the city and, say, Oakland (or Wyoming), there is nothing inherent to city government that makes it less exclusive, or less oppressive, than the current U.S. Federal Government. Schemes that provide urban or localized citizenship benefits regardless of national migration status can be helpful to migrants, but nonetheless replicate a logic of geographically exclusive belonging and exclusion that is hard to get away from without doing away with the concept of citizenship

entirely.

FRACTAL BORDERS: WHAT DIRECTION DOES THE BARBED WIRE FACE?

[Some greek anarchists](#) recently coined a phrase that's worth considering from two angles: All Cops Are Borders. On one hand, it's true that interactions with the police are the primary way undocumented people in the U.S. and much of Europe end up in deportation proceedings, and cops are indeed key elements of the border system. Police cooperation is what allowed the Obama administration to deport more people from the U.S. than Bush, and these cooperative agreements are still operating under Trump, even as ICE spools up increasingly brutal and widespread raids of workplaces and communities.

At the same time, the police form another kind of boundary line, as an occupation force that kills and exiles poor people and people of color throughout the U.S. On paper, the state's legal framework differentiates between deportation and criminal sentencing: The first is supposedly a "non-punitive" measure, even as families are broken up and children exiled; the second is supposedly intended to rehabilitate. Nevertheless, it's easy to see that the exile inherent in our vast prison system draws a boundary, legally and geographically isolating a large (and disproportionately black and brown) population from their friends and loved ones. In the end, both deportation and mass incarceration put specific populations on the wrong side of a fence.

It's at this point that we can point to an idea about borders that many people should be able to understand intuitively: To understand the workings of power across space, we need no more than to look at the direction the barbed wire faces. While fencing

along the southern border of the United States faces outward, for the supposed protection of the citizens residing on the inside and against threats originating outside state territorial boundaries, we should also recognize a border in the razor wire surrounding thousands of prison facilities nationwide. Abolitionist language commonly refers to inside-outside solidarity between those "inside" prisons and those "on the outside" in the free(er) space created for citizens, but we can also think of prisons as pockets of the "outside" scattered across state territory. Prisons are not, after all, "in" the society guarded by the state: Rather, they are precisely the places the state uses to exclude those whose existence challenges the order of law and capitalist property. Prison walls serve to keep those "outside the law" outside society.

To speak even more generally, it might be possible to map a cohesive topology of the fence that starkly divides "inside" from "out," including not only national borders and prisons, but also the less noticeable but no less important architectural features of everyday life, from the gated community (used to isolate an island of wealth from surrounding poverty) to the fence in my own city that surrounds a public housing project, isolating it from the whiter, wealthier neighborhood that surrounds it. In each of these cases, the fence has a clear and visible direction: Keeping "outsiders" out of the world constructed by citizenship. While the intensities of enforcement differ, it's useful to think of borders not as bright, clearly defined lines on maps dividing state territories, but rather closer to a set of nested and interlocking fractal spaces that replicates similar logics through space across multiple scales.

In this world, where all cops are borders, and spaces are criss-crossed by a fractal archipelago of visible and invisible fences, it is the responsibility of those of us on both sides of them to tear