

Anarchism, Ethnicity and Culture: The Oriental Anarch

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Asia is home to over half of the world's population, with 1,338,612,968 people in the People's Republic of China alone. As such, it represents a vital demographic of the global working class, and one which cannot be ignored when contemplating the history of anarchist thought and action.

Workers Solidarity 58 provides a thorough history, reproduced at LibCom, of the origins of anarchism in Japan;

Today Japan brings to mind high tech corporations, stressed out primary school students and a gruelling work ethic that demands loyalty to the company. One hundred and thirty years ago it was a very different place, predominantly agricultural and ruled over by a feudal elite. In 1868, these rulers decided to industrialise the country and create a highly centralised state. For this reason, the Japanese experience of capitalism is different from that in many European countries. Here, aristocrats were replaced (either gradually or by revolution) by a rising class of businessmen. There, the aristocrats became the new businessmen. The culture of feudalism wasn't rejected and replaced, rather it was remained and provided the background to the new society. This meant that Japan at the turn of the century was a country that was becoming more industrial and yet remained extremely conformist. It was in these difficult conditions that anarchism ideas first took hold in Japan.

The movement was to be dramatically influenced by the world wars in which Japan played a leading part. Three phases are evident: from 1906–1911, from 1911–1936, from 1944–present day.

Ideas have to come from somewhere. In Japan anarchist ideas were first popularised by Kotoku Shusui. Born in a provincial town in 1871, he moved to Tokyo in his teens. His political ideas developed on the pages of a number of papers he wrote and edited. Though these early newspapers weren't anarchist, they were liberal enough to bring him to the notice of the authorities. He was imprisoned in 1904 for breaking one of the many draconian press laws. As it is for many, prison was to be his school.

There he read anarchist communist Peter Kropotkin's 'Fields, Factories and Workshops'. In prison he also began to consider the role of the Emperor in Japanese society. Many socialists at the time, avoided criticising the Emperor, in contrast Kotoku began to see how the Emperor was at the centre of both capitalism and the power of the state in Japan.

Following his release from prison he emigrated to the USA. There he joined the newly formed Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW, also known as the Wobblies), a syndicalist trade union, strongly influenced by anarchist ideas. In the US he had access to more anarchist literature, reading Kropotkin's 'The Conquest of Bread'.

On his returned to Japan in 1906 he spoke to a large public meeting on the ideas he had developed while in the US. A number of articles then followed. "I hope" he wrote "that from now on the socialist movement will abandon its commitment to a parliamentary party and will adapt its method and policy to the direct action of the workers united as one".

As Shusui was familiarising himself with Kropotkin's work, the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion saw anarchist thought take hold in China. As Jason Adams explains in *Non-Western Anarchisms: Rethinking the Global Context*;

When speaking of "Chinese anarchism" one might be tempted to think of it as simply that which developed within the actual borders of the country. But to do so would be to disregard the important influence migration has had on the movement, which was quite internationalist in scope. On the mainland, Chinese anarchist activity was concentrated primarily in the Guangzhou region of southern China, as well as in Beijing. In Guangzhou, Shifu was the most active and influential of the anarchists, helping to organize some of the first unions in the country. Students from Guangzhou formed the Truth Society, the first anarchist organization in the city of Beijing amongst many other projects. But like other nation-states around the world at this time, China was quickly becoming a more dynamic, diverse nation marked deeply by the repeated invasions of foreign powers as well as by the global migrations of its own peoples. Anarchists lived and organized in Chinese communities the world over, including Japan, France, the Philippines, Singapore, Canada and the United States ; of these, the two most significant locations were the diaspora communities in Tokyo and Paris.

Of the two, the Paris anarchists were ultimately the more influential on a global level. Heavily influenced by their European surroundings (as well as whatever other personal reasons brought them there), they came to see much of China as backwards, rejecting most aspects of traditional culture. Turning towards modernism as the answer to China's problems, they embraced what they saw as the universal power of science, embodied largely in the ideas of Kropotkin. In this spirit, Li Shizeng and Wu Zhihui formed an organization with a strong internationalist bent, called "the World Society" in 1906 (Dirlik p. 15). In contrast the Chinese anarchists in Tokyo were such as Liu Shipai were blatantly anti-modernist, embracing traditional Chinese thought

and customs. Living in a different social context, for many different reasons, they were far more heavily influenced by anarchism as it had developed in Japan.

Although “anarchism enjoyed a nearly universal hegemony over the [Chinese] movement from 1905–1930,” the influence of Comintern and neighbouring Russia meant that doctrines which espoused “the need for centralized, absolute authority” would soon dominate. Maoism quickly established itself as the dominant political force in China, and under the authoritarianism of the “People’s Republic,” anarchism was forced underground. A similar situation prevailed in Korea.

In Japan, anarchists faced successive repressions by the state. Shusui was one of twelve executed in 1910 after the state used the discovery of bomb-making equipment as a pretext to suppress dissent. Japanese imperialism in Manchuria offered the reasoning to shut down two nationwide and highly active anarchist federations. And as a US client after World War II, suppression of the left in general followed a familiar format.

In India, something else entirely occurred. As Adams explains;

Though India is located on the Western border of China, connection and communication between the anarchisms of both are relatively unknown since in India anarchism never really took on much of a formally named “anarchist” nature. In India, the relevance of anarchism is primarily in the deep influence major aspects of it had on important movements for national and social liberation.

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Anarchism finds its first and most well-known expression in India with Mahatma Gandhi’s statement “the state evil is not the cause but the effect of social evil, just as the sea-waves are the effect not the cause of the storm. The only way of curing the disease is by removing the cause itself” (p. 36). In other words, Gandhi saw violence as the root of all social problems, and the state as a clear manifestation of this violence since its authority depends on a monopoly of its legitimate use. Therefore he held that “that state is perfect and non-violent where the people are governed the least. The nearest approach to purest anarchy would be a democracy based on nonviolence” (p. 37). For Gandhi, the process of attaining such a state of total non-violence (ahimsa) involved a changing of the hearts and minds of people rather than changing the state which governed them. Self-rule (swaraj) is the underlying principle that runs throughout his theory of satyagraha. This did not mean, as many have interpreted it, just the attainment of political independence for the Indian nation-state, but actually, just the opposite. Instead, swaraj starts first from the individual, then moves outward to the village level, outward further to the national level ; the basic principal is that of the moral autonomy of the individual above all other considerations (p. 38).

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Gandhi’s notions of a pacifist path to swaraj were not without opposition, even within the ranks of those influenced by anarchism. Before 1920 a parallel, more explicitly anarchist movement was represented by India’s anarchist-sindicalists and the seminal independence leader, Bhagat Singh. Singh was influenced by an array

of Western anarchisms and communisms and became a vocal atheist in a country where such attitudes were extremely unpopular. Interestingly, he studied Bakunin intensely but though he was markedly less interested in Marx, he was very interested in the writings of Lenin and Trotsky who “had succeeded in bringing about a revolution in their country.” So overall, Singh can be remembered as something of an Anarchist-Leninist, if such a term merits use. In the history of Indian politics, Singh is today remembered as fitting somewhere between Gandhian pacifism and terrorism, as he actively engaged in the organization of popular anti-colonial organizations with which to fight for the freedom of India from British rule. However, he was also part of a milieu which Gandhi referred to as “the cult of the bomb” – which of course he declared was based upon Western notions of using violence as a means to attain liberation. In response, Indian revolutionaries countered that Gandhi’s nonviolence ideas were also of Western origin, originating from Leo Tolstoy and therefore not authentically Indian either (Rao, 2002). It is in fact likely that Singh was influenced by Western notions of social change : like his Japanese counterpart Kotoku Shusui, Singh’s comrade and mentor Kartar Singh Sarabha organized South Asian workers in San Francisco, leading both of them to eventually commit their lives to the liberation of Indians the world over.

So, although “anarchist ideas (if not anarchist ideology as a whole) played a major role in both Gandhian and Singhian movements,” there was never any formal movement towards stateless communism. Instead, there we saw partition between an explicitly Islamic state (Pakistan) and an Indian state in which the oppressive caste system would make hierarchy and servitude even more explicitly hereditary than it is in the West.

In Asia, then, modern anarchist movements are hard to find. Pakistan, riven with factionalism and caught up in a struggle between Islamism and US imperialism, has no considerable socialist movements, let alone ones based in anarchism. In India, even reformism is hard to come by and struggles to make significant gains. Elsewhere, however, there are reasons for (very) cautious optimism.

Although there still exists a Korean Anarchist Communist Federation (KACF), it remains obscure. That Korea is split between an authoritarian capitalist state in the south and an oppressive form of Stalinist-feudalism in the north leaves little scope for the development of movements seeking freedom and autonomy. This is not to say, however, that resistance never occurs. The recent occupation of the Ssangyong car factory by workers facing redundancy shows a high degree of worker militancy in South Korea, even if it remains tied to a union leadership willing to sell out its members in the name of self-interest. The existence of a Migrants’ Trade Union which is challenging the oppression of migrant labour in the country is also a significant development. Such movements can and should be fostered with international solidarity, but they remain a long way from any form of open revolutionary movement.

In North Korea, we know little to nothing even of workers’ conditions, let alone efforts to fight back. With such an absolute blackout, it is hard to know how anarchist currents might even *begin* to take form. Moreover, with continual pressure from the United States only furthering the country’s aggressive isolationism, the slightest in-road even towards basic reforms seems impossible. Nonetheless, we can be sure that Kim Jong-Il’s “communist” monarchy is not a beneficent one, and that solidarity with those trapped within it is vital.

LibCom adequately sums up the present situation of anarchism in Japan;

The movement today is much smaller than before, and from the UK it is difficult to find much English language information about them. There are a few websites around by anarcho-syndicalists and -communists, and some small collectives active in Kyoto, Osaka and Tokyo that we at libcom.org know of. No doubt they face many of the same problems that we do; how to show people that they don't have to just make do, how to convince people that an alternative is possible and that they have power to create it.

Perhaps the economic turmoil that Japan is now experiencing will lead people to criticise and reject the current system. If that happens, hopefully Japanese anarchists will be able provide a vision of society based on freedom and equality, begin to rebuild the movement, so once more anarchist ideas have mass influence.

In China, anarchism remains influential as an underground resistance movement. Particularly, a significant underground labour movement has developed in opposition to state repression, with one such organisation being Autonomous Beijing. They, along with others, were responsible for the short-lived uprising in Tianamen Square. By necessity, little is known of their existence and membership, but the existence of a continuing run of strikes and acts of resistance show that they are far from crushed. Indeed, the recent anti-pollution protests and even the Uyghur riots show that the Chinese people have the will to rise up against the state capitalist bureaucracy which has them under its bootheel. Let it not be said that working class resistance in China is dead and buried.

There are other places on the Asian continent that I have not covered in depth, such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Indonesia. The reason for this is that little to nothing is known about the state of anarchist movements there.

The entire Indochina region, of course, has suffered extreme violence in the latter half of the twentieth century which makes its situation unique. The US, of course, devastated Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos during the Indochina wars and engendered considerable political upheaval. Vietnam remains under the grip, as China, of an authoritarian Communist government with a poor human rights record. Laos is also a single-party Communist state. Released from the atrocities and brutal repression of the Khmer Rouge regime by Vietnamese intervention, Cambodia now has a representative democracy under a constitutional monarchy. Recovery from first US devastation then Khmer Rouge despotism has been slow but steady, and we can but hope that as it goes on more libertarian currents will develop in the region. Indonesia is a US client state which has barely begun to reform since the outcry over the East Timor genocide and the resignation of military dictator Suharto, though the popular protests that forced his resignation are one sign that positive rebellious currents may yet emerge there.

Ultimately, we can say that the future of anarchism in Asia is likely to be as checkered as its past. However, we can hope that with international solidarity and burgeoning recognition of the injustices that exist across the region, some momentum can be gained by those wishing to challenge the system and strive for liberty and equality across the continent.

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