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Anarchism in the Oppressed Nations

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Book review: Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940; The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution by Hirsch, Steven, & van der Walt, Lucien (eds.). (2010). Leiden, Netherlands/ Boston: Brill.

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I understand that there will eventually be a paperback version. If this should happen, we will have to see what price is being charged. Until then, anarchists should read chapter 10 of *Black Flame* (Schmidt and van der Walt, 2009), on anarchism, racism, and national liberation. This is disappointing. At the current price, this book can have only a limited impact in educating and building a movement.

The book opens up many further questions, as the editors know. Given the book's focus, naturally it does not discuss how anarchists in imperialist countries have related to the struggles for liberation in oppressed nations—and how they should relate (that is, besides opposing their own country's imperialism.) In my opinion, to be consistent with the “third approach,” anarchists in the oppressor nations should find ways to be in solidarity with the mass movement without giving political support to the nationalist leadership.

However, I would have liked discussion of why anarchism and syndicalism declined in these countries after the 1920s, or by the 1940s at the latest. There is a Preface by Benedict Anderson which suggests, “*In an age of mass militarization, vastly enhanced police power enhanced by technological innovation, and militarized nationalisms, anarchism appeared to have less and less relevance*” (p. xxv). I would think that such developments made anarchism ever more relevant!

“Neo-Platformists” and others would say that at least one factor in their decline was the failure of the anarchists to organize themselves into special revolutionary organizations, inside and outside of unions. But anarchists did do this in some countries, so this is not the whole story. More generally, the (temporary!) decline of anarchism was associated with the worldwide defeat of the working class in the 30s and 40s, with the rise of fascism, Stalinism, and imperialist world war—Stalinism benefitting by its identification with the Russian Revolution. This is briefly discussed by the editors in the last chapter, “Final Reflections” (pp, 395–412). But much more needs to be said, if anarchists are to repeat the successes and avoid the failures of the past.

There is one major problem with this book: its price. It has a list price of \$155.00. It is an academic book, volume 6 of “Studies in Global Social History,” published in the Netherlands. Presumably it is meant to be bought by university libraries. Its price puts it way beyond the reach of working class people or even “middle class” college students.

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special demands which might antagonize the whites and break up “class unity.” This may sound very left but is really a de facto capitulation to racism.

Instead the original white anarchists had to learn to reach out to the majority of the South African people. They had to make “...active, and specific, efforts to mobilize African, Coloured, and Indian workers around both their class and national grievances” (p. 33). This approach resulted in a multinational syndicalist popular movement, based in unions, periodicals, and specifically anarchist organizations. It was committed both to fighting against the white supremacist oppression of the South African majority and against the exploitation of the whole, multi-racial, South African working class. Over time people of color became leading militants in the anarchist and syndicalist movement.

Anarchist agreement with nationalists is negative: both are against imperialism and foreign domination. But for anarchists, “*The aim of the working class revolution was not to constitute an independent national state. It was...to constitute a self-managed libertarian socialist ‘Industrial Republic’...*” (p. 35), as part of an “*International Industrial Republic.*”

An Excellent Book but an Expensive One

This is a superb book. At times it is too academic for my taste, but it is supposed to be an academic book; it began as a panel at a 2006 history conference in Amsterdam. Mostly it tells a series of fascinating stories. For example, the chapter on Ukraine may be the best brief account of the Makhnovist movement.

After this volume it should no longer be possible for Marxist-Leninists to claim that anarchists have never had anything useful to say or do in the oppressed nations. Nor should it be possible for any anarchists to argue that anarchists have always opposed national liberation movements.

to achieve leadership of the national liberation struggle. From this perspective, anarchists and syndicalists must participate in national liberation struggles while remaining skeptical of the nationalists and their plans for statehood....” (pp. lxiv, lxv).

There is a counter-argument that all national liberation movements have, in fact, been led by statist nationalists, with limited real gains for the people. This is true, obviously, but it is only another way of saying that we have not yet had the international anarchist revolution.

Actually the three main approaches to national liberation are also the three main approaches of anarchists to any type of popular struggle. Just as an example, the struggle to establish unions can be approached, first, by deciding to ignore it as useless because of its domination by pro-capitalist bureaucracies. Or, second, anarchists could throw themselves into it, acting as apolitical organizers for the union leaderships. Or, third, anarchists could participate in the union movement, work to build unions, while finding ways to raise their program for militant, democratic, and revolutionary unions.

The first approach is held by many anarchists and anti-statist Marxists; it is sectarian, passive, and “ultra-leftist.” The second position has been held by many anarchists and others who dissolve themselves into the unions; it is “opportunist” and “economist.” Whatever your subjective motives, if you do nothing but act like a reformist then you are a reformist. The last position attempts to avoid both sectarianism and opportunism. It calls for participation, while finding ways to raise the revolutionary program in opposition to that of the bureaucrats. The same three possible approaches apply to all struggles.

Lucien van der Walt makes a further comment on the revolutionary approach when he discusses the history of South African anarchism (pp. 33–94). It was not enough for revolutionaries to have an abstractly correct but passive opposition to racial oppression. By itself, this could mean asking Africans and other people of color to subordinate themselves to white workers, saying: Don’t make

It is widely believed on the radical left that anarchism has been solely a movement of Europe and North America. Marxists and liberals state that anarchism has never had anything to offer the majority of humanity in the oppressed and impoverished nations (the so-called “Third World”)—unlike Marxism or pro-Western liberalism. This is not just a historical argument. Today there is a great expansion of international anarchism. The assertion of anarchism’s supposed irrelevance to the exploited nations in the past is an assertion that anarchism cannot be relevant to most of the world today. The contrary claim that anarchism as a movement was once significant for colonized peoples is a claim that it may be significant now and in the future.

That claim is made by the papers in Hirsch and van der Walt’s book. It covers the period from the last quarter of the 19th century up to World War II, although some chapters only include shorter periods (such as up to the 1920s). Within this timespan, the papers cover the historical impact of anarchism in several countries throughout the regions of the earth.

For Eastern Asia, chapters discuss anarchism in China and in Korea. For Latin America, it covers Peru, Mexico, Cuba, Argentina, and Brazil. For the Arab East, it has a paper on Egypt. Sub-Sahara Africa is represented in a paper on South Africa. There is a chapter on Ukraine. This is a brilliant, brief, summary of the Ukrainian movement led by Nestor Makhno during the time of the Russian Revolution.

The only Western European country discussed is Ireland, which was a colony of Britain. Ireland did not have much of an explicitly anarchist movement, but it had a significant syndicalist movement (radical unionism, which overlaps with anarchism).

The writers do not deny that anarchism and syndicalism began in Western Europe. Capitalism and industrialism began there and, therefore, so did the reactions to them: liberalism, nationalism, Marxism, as well as anarchism. These ideologies then spread over the world, interacting with and merging with local conditions.

In particular, anarchism was spread by the international circulation of workers and others. Many Spanish-speaking anarchist workers went to the Western hemisphere. They went mainly to make a living but they spread anarchism and built syndicalist unions in the Caribbean, Latin America, and the U.S.A. Italian anarchists worked in Egypt, and spread their ideas to Egyptians and workers of other countries. Chinese and Korean workers and young intellectuals traveled to Japan, to learn from Japanese anarchists, as well as a few going as far as Paris, to bring back radical ideas. European workers settled in South Africa and spread anarchist ideas to the Africans. International networks of anarchists were central to the spread of anarchism.

Throughout the world, class-struggle anarchist ideas merged with ideas of the IWW and with Marxist syndicalism (such as DeLeonism), as well as with “native” traditions of struggle against oppression. Anarchist-influenced syndicalist unions were built throughout the oppressed nations, even more than in Western Europe.

Anarchism and National Liberation

As anarchist ideas spread to the countries exploited by imperialism, anarchists had to deal with the problems of national oppression and the local people’s struggle against it. It could not be ignored; the issue had to be faced. “In China, Cuba, Korea, Ireland, and Ukraine, [anarchists] played an important role in ‘independence’ wars” (p. xxiv).

Of course, all anarchists were against imperialism and white supremacy, and they did not think that the solution to these evils was nationalism (the creation of new national states, with new national ruling classes). This is what made them anarchists. But what then?

As the editors state, in an opening chapter (pp.xxxi—lxxiii), there were three main approaches taken by anarchists. The first was to reject independence struggles altogether as useless and pointless, as inevitably dominated by nationalism, and therefore totally undeserving of support. This was the view of a significant minority of the Cuban anarchists during the Cuba fight for independence from Spain. Today this view is held by many U.S. and European anarchists and anti-statist Marxists.

A second approach took the opposite tack. Desiring to be on the side of the oppressed, it endorsed nationalism without criticism. Like the first model approach, it saw nationalism and national liberation as inevitably going together, but saw this as a positive argument for nationalism. Examples can be found in the Korean movement as well as among the Chinese anarchists, both of which had trends which capitulated to rightwing, anti-Communist, nationalists (e.g., joining the bourgeois Goumingdang in China).

A third approach is “the most sophisticated and arguably the most important historically” (p. lxiv). National liberation struggles were seen as legitimate and real contributors to the project of human emancipation. The program of nationalism was only one possible program for providing national liberation. It was not inevitable that nationalism would win dominance in every national struggle. It was not inevitable that the national bourgeoisie or other would-be new rulers would take over every such effort. Not if anarchists participated in the national movements and struggled for their program of international proletarian revolution.

“Nationalist and elitist forces could be displaced, with the intervention of anarchists and syndicalists pushing national liberation struggles directly towards internationalist and anti-statist social revolution....This position...centered on contesting the national liberation struggle within a larger movement that included nationalists. At its heart was a conceptual distinction between nationalism (merely aiming at a new state) and national liberation in general (potentially able to move to social revolution); and, from this, a determination