

A Non-European Anarchism

Aragorn!

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The story of the people who have not written the history books, who have not built empires, and who have not aspired to lord over others is our history. To some extent, the nature of these times is that for this tale to be told, each of us have to make a commitment to it, to both write, speak and learn about the crevices and shadows in which the “winners” did not invade, and in which we live. This story of survival, of just getting by, is the story of the life of the vast (as in over 90%) majority of the people throughout time, throughout modern civilization. Survival is the only possibility when participation means what it does today.

While this text cites Europe as the ultimate expression of the successes that reflect our loss, it is not solely Europe’s legacy. Similar (if not as grand) tales of invasion, colonization, and genocide can be told of other cultures. The difference is that they are not the inheritors of the world system today. Europe is.

Militarism, Capitalism, Statecraft and their consequences in Racism, Genocide, and Total War can all be placed on Europe’s doorstep. This doesn’t mean that there are not Europeans who resist this tradition, this practice, but if the world has a problem, or a set of problems, it can be traced to origins. It is not enough to eke out examples of these problems in other places as an escape from the consequences of origin. In an alternate universe it is possible that we could be railing against the tyranny of the Ottoman Empire.

There is a need at this time to declare an anti-authoritarian tendency that both respects its origins and fights against them. An anti-statist, anti-economic position that prioritizes cultural values over scientific determinism and the maintenance of empire. A position that values diversity over any unitary answer to political and social life. It is the time to connect the realities of our colonial history, land relations, and politics to the conclusions of both its rebels and our elders. From the Irish to the Makah, the Kurds to the Mbuti, the urban African-American to the settled Rom a story can be told outside of Western Civilization. A non-European Anarchism is the politic of that story set within the context of a resistance to it.

What is Europe

When I speak of Europeans or mental Europeans I’m not allowing for false distinctions. I’m not saying that on the one hand there are the byproducts of a few thousand years of genocidal, reactionary European intellectual development which is bad, and on the other hand there is some new revolutionary development which is good. I’m referring here to the so-called theories of Marxism and anarchism and “leftism” in general. I don’t believe their theories can be separated from the rest of the European intellectual tradition. It’s really just the same old song... — Russel Means, *The Same Old Song*

Europe is an unusual continent for a variety of reasons. Not the least of which is that there are as many people living outside of the continent as live within its boundaries. History, at least as taught in North America, is mostly interested in the consequences and developments that have occurred on the continent over the past two millennia. This history, if compared to the history of every other continent combined, would still loom as entirely dominant in the minds and culture of the US and Canada. It is safe to call the mainstream of North American culture European. You can consider the largest landmass of Oceania as European also, which demonstrates that it is a distinctive trend of Europe to export itself throughout the globe.

This expansionist phenomenon has a historical context that is worth examining. Europe is not where the rise of Civilization occurred. It appears to have begun in the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, Mesopotamia. Dozens, if not hundreds, of societies thrived in this valley over 3000 years. The best known of these societies are the Sumerian, Babylonian, Hittite and Phoenician societies. They are best known for the techniques they provided future societies which include mythology (Sumeria), the Code of Hammurabi (Babylon), iron (Hittites), and the alphabet (Phoenicians). Around the same time a vast and vibrant society arose around the river Nile, called Egypt. This African society existed for several thousand years in one form or another, and presaged modern government. These two regions along with China comprise the vast majority of our understanding of ancient society.

The formation of mass society on the European continent is clearer and more recent. The arc of the Greek Empire (1200 – 300 BCE) includes the formation of just about all the intellectual trajectories pursued over the past three millennia including Art, Science, Politics (especially the form of Democracy and the Republic), and Philosophy. This leads us to Rome, the most demonstrable foundation of modern Europe.

We shall continue to focus on Rome's contributions to the civilization we currently live in. Notable in modern life is the Roman development of urban infrastructure and the resulting expectations that the citizenry of empire have had to it. The delivery of potable water, sewage, well maintained roads, and the construction of large buildings have all become expectations of civilized, urban life. The organization of a disciplined and standing army that waged total war has defined every empire and quasi-empire since.

The Fall of Rome could have possibly lead to a hidden revolutionary time on the European continent. The period formerly referred to as the Dark Ages was notable for not suffering under the yoke of Empire and for not having a great deal of history written about it. The histories that we do have access to tell of a set of cultures that closely resembled the North American mound-builders. What is easily known is that Feudalism, and eventually Monarchies began to consolidate the land and cultures of Europe. The form of this consolidation can be seen today in the formation of the United Kingdom, France, and Germany.

The Rise of Christianity sparked much of this creation of the State, but more pointedly was responsible for, in the name of the Crusades, eliminating the bulk of the hundreds of cultures that existed up to that point on the continent.

This is actually where Rome, in hindsight, could be called progressive in comparison. If a defeated society paid their tax, they could largely practice their own cultural beliefs. This changed with the formation of the Christian state.

After the Middle Ages and the rise of Christianity comes the Reformation and then Humanism. These changes to the simplicity of the one Church, one state model of Europe hearken to the techniques used now to modify conservative and socially backward elements in the modern ideological matrix. The Reformation allowed, eventually, Christianity to be defined far more broadly than just allegiance to a specific institution, but to a set of organizations and interpretations of spirituality. This allowed for a specifically European (and not local) cultural expression that crossed national borders, and carried currency well into the modern era. Humanism is, simply put, the priority of human concerns over any other. Humanism led to the specific formation of the individual as social character, the entire arena of social sciences, and to a great degree to the formation of the creation of modern science as a conquest of nature.

War

The primary technology that Europe has excelled at, beyond all others, is warfare. This is not to argue that armed conflict did not exist beyond the continent, but the form it has taken in Europe has been qualitatively different. It is only in Europe, with the rise of the practice and theory of 'total war' that much of European expansionist history can be understood. It is only through understanding the cultural tradition of total war that one can understand the horrors of the twentieth century in Europe and abroad.

While *The Art of War* and *A Book of Five Rings* concern the techniques of the battlefield, they did not relate war to a particularly functionalist worldview. War was not an application of imperialist power as much as the practice of a certain class of citizenry amongst themselves. Military strategy was as connected to the spiritual understanding of being a warrior as it was to placing men in power.

The 18th century transformed staid codification of military principles into a scientific practice that remains today. As opposed to the general outlines of relationships between military and civic leaders given in the ancient texts, modern military strategists, especially Clausewitz, were specific. Total war is military conflict in which the contenders are willing to make any sacrifice in lives and other resources to obtain a complete victory. Limited war is similar to total war, but does attend to political, social and economic concerns. The formation of the differentiation between total and limited war gave texture to the behavior of the Europeans that colonized the New World, Africa, and institutionalized the Crusades.

The question is worth revisiting, what is Europe? Europe is the history of hundreds of cultures being crushed. Europe is a disparate set of people who both infringe on others' sovereignty throughout the world and continue to be beset upon (NATO, Slovakia, Serbia, EU). Europe is the benefactor of a set of ideas—economic, military, religious and secular—that have dominated the entire planet.

If Europe is everywhere, on every newscast, every billboard, every thoroughfare, then what is not-Europe? On one level not-Europe are all the people in the process of being *Europeanized*, all the people being introduced to modern conveniences, like microwave ovens, coca-cola, and cruise missiles. Many of these people look forward to the change in their traditional, conservative society. Many resist, understanding the consequences that Western values, power, and money will bring to them.

On another level not-Europe is the vital cultural tapestry of the Fourth world. Indigenous people exist throughout the globe, and resisting or not they comprise sets of perspectives and histories that are distinctive and unique. They compromise much of the most resistant aspects to the global order. Not because they are not poor, but because they understand the poverty of another cultures.

Finally not-Europe could be the silent benefactors and victims of modern society. It is a foregone conclusion that modern society is comprised of a vast majority of people who cannot exert political power, are not wealthy, and may wish to resist the way things are. With its combination of engaging topical propaganda, cursory and self-serving historical education, and general economic satisfaction it becomes easy to lose track of these people. They do exist and their very anonymity is the political engine behind every popular and reactionary movement over the past 200 years.

What is European Anarchism?

While the semantics of anarchy (that is, “without ruler”) could illuminate future discussion, any type of analysis of the potential of anarchism has to grapple with the ideology that it is. This ideology is:

- A history of iconic figures.
- A set of increasingly radical ideas about social transformation.
- A practice that has only been uniform in its rejection by those in power. Understanding the repercussions of the use of language, the history (broadly defined) and the culture of the anarchist tradition will help us understand the qualities that anarchism has that are worth reclaiming.

The clearest origin of anarchism in the western tradition lies in ancient Greece and the argument of Zeno (the Stoic) for a society ruled by the sovereignty of the moral law of the individual. While not specifically an anarchist position, Zeno serves as a practical counter-point to the ideal nation of Plato’s *Republic*; the foundation for the nation-building that has occurred since. In the modern, post-Enlightenment era the first treatise in defense of anarchism came from William Godwin (1793).¹ He argued that government is unnecessary and harmful to the conduct of human affairs. He also believed that society could be transformed into a world of justice and equality through education and propaganda, and not through specific political struggle. His influence of anarchism as a school of thought (and not just a movement for social change) cannot be overstated. The four fathers of European anarchism lived in the second half of the 19th century and included Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Pierre Proudhon and Max Stirner. They stand as the central figures in modern anarchist activism, anarcho-communism, mutualism, and individualism respectively. In the twentieth century such figures as Emma Goldman, known for her advocacy of contraception and free love; Sacco and Vanzetti, known as anarchist martyrs killed by the state; and Nestor Makhno, who fought against the Bolsheviks and White armies in the Russian Revolution, inform a conception of anarchism as martyrdom and activism.

The preceding paragraph is an attempt to scurry past the mythology of the anarchist. Not because of any rejection of these mythologies, as they are some of the most human stories that can be told in the face of their opposition, but because understanding that there are deeper stories of actual human struggle and inspiration is what an observation of individual anarchists should provide us. It is not as a result of glamorous rebels that the anarchist tradition breathes life into human experience today. Their stories exemplify the tradition without obscuring each of our parts in it.

While the origins of Anarchism seem most interested in the science of statecraft, anarchism has since evolved into a criticism of technology, religion, capitalism, and the state. This evolution happened because the principles that would lead one to conclude that the state was oppressive naturally led to the conclusion that those same systems also exist in other arenas of the human experience. What are these principles? Vaneigem has described them so.²

¹ *Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, by William Godwin.

² *The Movement of the Free Spirit*, by Raoul Vaneigem.

“Although each of us starts along the path as a whole, living being, intending to return just as we were when we left off, we became completely lost in a maze of wasted time, so that what returns is only a corpse of our being, mummified in its memories. The striving of humanity after survival is a saga of childhood bartered away for decrepitude.”

Vaneigem’s choice of metaphors and the principle of a “first man” runs through most libertarian literature. Bakunin in *God and the State*³ exemplifies the principle of contrariness.

“The abolition of the Church and the State must be the first and indispensable condition of the true liberation of society; only after this can society be organized in another manner, but not from the top downwards and according to some ideal plan, dreamed up by a few sages and scholars, and certainly not by decrees issued by some dictatorial power or even by a national assembly elected by universal suffrage. As I have already shown, such a system would lead inevitably to the creation of a new state, and consequently to the formation of a governmental aristocracy, that is to say a whole class of individuals having nothing in common with the mass of the people, which would immediately begin to exploit and subdue that people in the name of the commonwealth or in order to save the State.”

Finally, the principle of cooperation (over competition) as articulated by Pyotr Kropotkin.⁴

“Mutual aid is as much a law of animal life as mutual struggle...as a factor of evolution, it most probably has a far greater importance, inasmuch as it favors the development of such habits and characters as insure the maintenance and further development of the species, together with the greatest amount of welfare and enjoyment of life for the individual, with the least waste of energy.”

While not authoritative, most modern incarnations of Anarchism derive from and include these principles. The application and depth has changed, but the idea that people were once free, can be again, and can do it ethically is a useful definition of anarchist intention.

In practice this labor of social transformation is connected to political activism. Often this happens within larger historical movements, frequently as the action of determined individuals to transform reality, and most often as the rejection of alienated people refusing to participate in the social and political apparatus.

There have been a variety of movements that have had an articulated anarchistic quality. The Free Spirit movement of the 13th and 14th century (scattered throughout the European Continent), inspired a female member to say “I have created all things. I created more than God. It is my hand that supports Heaven and Earth. Without me nothing exists.” The Diggers of the 17th century England attempted to use public lands for living on, and were subsequently burned out of their homes. The Paris Commune liberated the city for 73 days before the army retook the city and slaughtered the Communards. Anarchistic soviets provided a backbone to the Russian Revolution before they were co-opted by the Bolsheviks in the name of the people. The Industrial Workers of the World, in the United States, were a labor union that attempted to unite the

³ *God and the State*, by Mikhail Bakunin.

⁴ *Mutual Aid*, by Pyotr Kropotkin.

workers into 'One Big Union' against capitalism as a whole and had some successes in early twentieth century America before many of their leaders were jailed or shipped to the Soviet Union. The 'propagandists by the deed' successfully murdered leaders of France (Carnot, 1894), Austria (Elisabeth, 1898) and the United States (McKinley, 1901). Millions of people collectivized their land and workplaces in the Spanish Civil War (1936 – 1937) only to be defeated by their own compromises and the fascists (but especially the fascists). Finally, in our parade of anarchistic moments, are the events of May '68 in France where a coalition of students and workers brought the French nation to its knees for nearly a month.

With the grand historical stage in place, the actual history of practiced anarchy has happened on a much smaller scale. Whether it has been within the left counter-cultural space (living arrangements, small cooperatives), the self-help movement (alcoholics anonymous, etc.), or youth counter-culture, the principles of living ethically, without hierarchies (and the people who love them), in cooperation with other people, and in opposition to authority is a major part of our human experience.

What is Non-European Anarchism?

It is not enough to take everything that has been stated so far about anarchism and Europe and therefore call our work done. Simply put, a non-European anarchism is not on the radar of most people. Most 'people of color', even within the anti-authoritarian sphere, take more of their political center of gravity from the rights movements over the past decades than from their own cultural practice or from a synthesis of what could be.

There are things that we can distill from what we have covered. Europe is a location, a symbol, an oppressor, a history and way to understand our current condition. It is a center of gravity which people involved with social change find very hard to escape. There are aspects of the traditional Anarchist canon that are worth holding on to.

The formation of a non-European anarchism is untenable. The term bespeaks a general movement when the goal is an infinite series of disparate movements. A non-European anarchism is the thumbnail sketch of what could be an African anarchism, a Maquiladora anarchism, a Plains Indian anarchism, an inner-city breed anarchism, et al.

A category should exist for every self-determined group of people to form their own interpretation of a non-European anarchism. The principle is that if European anarchism could be shifted onto the shoulders of the people living outside the burden of the European system than it could be borne far more easily. It could be carried more 'anarchistically' than when safe-guarded by the current group of cosmopolitan materialists.

What, then, are the aspects of anarchism that are worth claiming, what are the principles of a non-European anarchism, what would the practice of a non-European anarchism look like and what would a non-European anarchist take on modern problems look like? Evaluating anarchism within the context of its history as a political movement, its current presentation as a social and political movement and what it has to offer to a non-European perspective has its complications. Respecting the tradition is not enough for many of its followers, they also require adherence to their particular definition. If you do not subscribe to the syndicalist approach to the question of unions or the communist approach to the question of economy or the individualist approach to the question of organization and personal freedom you are sure to hear of it. These issues

have importance in this world, between the adherents to one tendency or another, but are not particularly interesting for those of us outside this canon.

With all respect due to its history, and a clear sight with regard to my own biases regarding modern anarchism, the aspects of anarchism that are relevant to a non-European anarchism are its perspectives regarding decentralization, mutual aid, power, cultural bias, single solutions to political questions, and rejection of authority.

A non-European anarchism would most likely concern itself with different sets of priorities than modern anarchism does. It would look to its traditions to resolve 'organizational' questions. It would approach strategic questions regarding social change alongside questions of cultural heritage and traditional outlooks. Concerns of recruitment, propaganda, and motivation would look very different to a non-European anarchism.

To speak to one possible example... A woodland native anarchism could evade the life-ways of the city dweller, opting instead for very few fixed locations over the course of a year and a generally seasonal lifestyle. Organization could look like a series of consensus decision-making groups concerned with differing elements of daily life. Politics would be concerned with questions of food acquisition, engagement with outsiders, travel, and conflict negotiation. This could only be possible in another world.

What could a non-European anarchism look like in this world? How could the fracturing of an already minuscule political tendency along cultural lines improve it? A primary concern to most people who criticize the Euro-centric aspects of anarchism is its tendency not to highly place the priorities of their cultural group. They are right, of course, but structurally there is very little (if not nothing) that modern anarchists can do about it. The resignation of anarchists to rely on what are fundamentally liberal notions of representation speaks for itself. Not only is it not particularly successful at attracting people from other cultures, it embeds resentment at the authoritarian, arbitrary, and 'politically correct' assertion of equality based on demographics. If the form of social organization were along cultural lines these problems would not exist. The problems would be different, but would not default to solutions that contain defeat. Larger social organization, as in between disperse groups, can begin to be conceptualized along a multitude of traditions and not just the European one. Struggle against the current political forms would reflect a far more complex level of participation that we could only hope would have more interesting results.

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