

# **The Historical Failure of Anarchism**

**Implications for the Future of the Revolutionary Project**

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In the Spring 1996 issue of *Workers Solidarity* (journal of Ireland's Workers Solidarity Movement) there is a review by Conor McLoughlin of Ken Loach's excellent film on the Spanish Revolution, *Land and Freedom*. The review concludes that:

(T)he factors involved in the defeat of the revolution would take an article in themselves to explain, ranging from the military power of the fascists (and their outside aid) to the betrayals by the communists and social democrats, and this is not my purpose here. What is important is that the social revolution did not collapse due to any internal problems or flaws in human nature. It was defeated from without. Anarchism had not failed. Anarchists had proved that ideas which look good in the pages of theory books look even better on the canvas of life.

This quote neatly sums up the lessons that most anarchists seem to have drawn from the history of the anarchist movement. It also neatly sums up what is wrong with the anarchist movement. It is nothing short of a complete abdication of one of the most basic responsibilities of revolutionaries: the responsibility to subject the defeats and failures of the movement to the most thoroughgoing critical scrutiny. Instead it takes a historical experience that ended in a crushing defeat, makes excuses for that defeat and offers the faithful reassuring platitudes that, all evidence to the contrary, the one true path of anarchism is vindicated by the experience.

When anarchists encounter this sort of thing in other ideologies they never fail to tear it to shreds. Does Communism bear responsibility for the heaping piles of corpses produced by Communist regimes? Is Christianity to be blamed for the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Witch Hunts? Of course. We judge ideologies by their practical results in people's lives not by their pie-in-the-sky promises. Anarchism in Spain raised the hopes of millions that a classless stateless society could be achieved in the here and now, lead them to the barricades to make it real, and failed abysmally. The Spanish people were condemned to forty years of fascist rule because of the failure. And yet while the anarchist movement of the past half century has produced an extensive literature extolling the momentary successes of the Spanish Revolution in the creation of peasant and workers collectives, there has been almost no serious effort to analyze how the anarchist movement contributed to its own defeat. Blaming ones political enemies (fascists, Communists, or social-democrats) for behaving exactly as one would expect them to behave only further confuses matters. Betrayal, after all, is only possible on the part of someone trusted.

## **The Responsibilities of Revolutionaries**

This paper is not primarily about the Spanish Revolution. Rather it is an attempt to pose some serious and difficult questions that I believe anarchism has irresponsibly avoided. It is addressed to those in the anarchist movement who are serious about making an anti-authoritarian revolution. It is not addressed to those who do not believe that such a revolution is possible. It is not addressed to those whose political horizons extend no further than establishing either a "temporary autonomous zone" or a semi-permanent bohemian enclave. Neither is it addressed to those for whom being a revolutionary means affecting a more militant than thou pose. The anarchist movement is filled with people who are less interested in overthrowing the existing oppressive social order than with washing their hands of it. This concern with ensuring the passage of ones soul to anarchist heaven can range from the obsessive efforts to purify one's personal habits to

the sectarian refusal to join any group or organization that shows any sign of being a product of this society.

I believe that an enormous amount of human suffering is the direct consequence of the fact that the majority of humanity does not have control over the decisions that affect their lives. I believe that people are ultimately capable of exercising that control over their own lives. Consequently the revolutionary overthrow of the authoritarian institutions and social relationships that stand in the way of realizing that control is a necessary undertaking. People who are engaged in that project are revolutionaries and as revolutionaries I believe we have certain responsibilities. It is necessary to speak of three of those responsibilities before getting into some of the thornier questions this paper aims to address.

### **To Win Freedom**

The strength of anarchism is its moral insistence on the primacy of human freedom over political expediency. But human freedom exists in a political context. It is not sufficient, however, to simply take the most uncompromising position in defense of freedom. It is necessary to actually win freedom. Anti-capitalism doesn't do the victims of capitalism any good if you don't actually destroy capitalism. Anti-statism doesn't do the victims of the state any good if you don't actually smash the state. Anarchism has been very good at putting forth visions of a free society and that is for the good. But it is worthless if we don't develop an actual strategy for realizing those visions. It is not enough to be right, we must also win.

### **To Learn from the Past**

People have been struggling for freedom forever. The single most valuable asset of the revolutionary movement is this experience. We are not the first people to grapple with the problem of how to make revolution and create a free society. We have an obligation to subject every chapter in the fight for freedom to the most searing analysis we are capable of. This is the only way that we can hope to avoid repeating the errors of the past. The anarchist approach to history, unfortunately, consists largely of looking for the lessons we want to find. The view of the Spanish Revolution critiqued above is a fairly typical example. This feel good approach to our own history (or to some imaginary prehistoric anarchist Eden) is generally coupled with a complete disinterest in the history of struggles that can't be neatly contained within our own ideological borders (however any individual might define them). The result is a sort of hagiology: a timeless procession of libertarian martyrs to be invoked in political debates. How many anarchists once they have read an anti-authoritarian account of some historical episode actually go and read accounts from other perspectives? If our history were an uninterrupted train of successes this certainty that there is nothing to learn from others would be a bit more defensible.

### **To Have a Plan**

Finally revolutionaries have a responsibility to have a plausible plan for making revolution. Obviously there are not enough revolutionaries to make a revolution at this moment. We can reasonably anticipate that the future will bring upsurges in popular opposition to the existing system. Without being any more specific about where those upsurges might occur it seems clear that it is from the ranks of such upsurges that the numbers of the revolutionary movement will

be increased, eventually leading to a revolutionary situation (which is distinguished from the normal crises of the current order only by the existence of a revolutionary movement ready to push things further). People who are fed up with the existing system and who are willing to commit themselves to its overthrow will look around for likeminded people who have an idea of what to do.

If we don't have a plausible plan for making revolution we can be sure that there will be somebody else there who will. There is no guarantee that revolutionary-minded people will be spontaneously drawn to anti-authoritarian politics.

The plan doesn't have to be an exact blueprint. It shouldn't be treated as something sacred. It should be subject to constant revision in light of experience and debate. But at the very least it needs to be able to answer questions that have been posed concretely in the past. We know that we will never confront the exact same circumstances as previous revolutions. But we should also know that certain problems are persistent ones and that if we can't say what we would have done in the past we should not expect people to think much of our ability to face the future.

There is a widespread tendency in the anarchist movement (and on the left in general) to say that the question of how we are going to actually make a revolution is too distant and therefore too abstract to deal with now. Instead it is asserted that we should focus on practical projects or immediate struggles. But the practical projects or immediate struggles we decide to focus on are precisely what will determine if we ever move any closer to making revolution. If we abdicate our responsibility to try to figure out what it will take to actually make revolution and to direct our current work accordingly we will be caught up in an endless succession of "practical projects and immediate struggles" and when confronted with a potentially revolutionary situation we will be pushed to the side by more politically prepared forces (who undoubtedly we will accuse of "betraying" the revolution if they don't shoot all of us). We will be carried by the tide of history instead of attempting to steer our own course. And by allowing this to happen again it will be we who have really betrayed the revolution.

The net result of the refusal to deal with what it will actually take to make a revolution is that anarchism has become a sort of directionless but militant reformism. We are either building various "counter-institutions" that resemble nothing so much as grungier versions of the social services administered by different churches; or we are throwing ourselves into some largely reactive social struggle in which our actions are frequently bold and courageous, but from which we never build any sort of ongoing social movement (let alone a revolutionary organization).

## **The Theoretical Poverty of Anarchism**

By the standards of these three responsibilities alone anarchism has been a failure. Not only has anarchism failed to win lasting freedom for anybody on earth, many anarchists today seem only nominally committed to that basic project. Many more seem interested primarily in carving out for themselves, their friends, and their favorite bands a zone of personal freedom, "autonomous" of moral responsibility for the larger condition of humanity (but, incidentally, not of the electrical grid or the production of electronic components). Anarchism has quite simply refused to learn from its historic failures, preferring to rewrite them as successes. Finally the anarchist movement offers people who want to make revolution very little in the way of a coherent plan of action.

Projects, schemes, and reasons to riot abound — but their place in a larger coherent strategy for actually overthrowing the existing order is anybody's guess.

Anarchism is theoretically impoverished. For almost 80 years, with the exceptions of Ukraine and Spain, anarchism has played a marginal role in the revolutionary activity of oppressed humanity. Anarchism had almost nothing to do with the anti-colonial struggles that defined revolutionary politics in this century. This marginalization has become self-reproducing. Reduced by devastating defeats to critiquing the authoritarianism of Marxists, nationalists and others, anarchism has become defined by this gadfly role. Consequently anarchist thinking has not had to adapt in response to the results of serious efforts to put our ideas into practice. In the process anarchist theory has become ossified, sterile and anemic. In the place of substantive political debate the anarchist movement has raised the personal quarrel to an art form. On the rare occasions that substantive issues are broached the response is invariably concerned more with the process by which they were broached or speculation on the character-structure of anybody who would question the received anarchist wisdom than with the political content of what has been said. This is a reflection of anarchism's effective removal from the revolutionary struggle.

Bakunin's brilliant predictions of the consequences of Marx's statism have not become the foundation for a developing anti-statist praxis, but rather a hollow chorus of "we told you so." One of the consequences of Marxism's "successes" has been that there has been greater opportunity to see its limitations. One of the consequences of anarchism's meager and short lived victories has been that many of our ideas have not been put to the test of practice. Once we are willing to accept that good anti-authoritarian intentions do not get us off the hook for the authoritarian consequences of anarchist incompetence it becomes possible to approach the whole historical experience of the revolutionary movement in a considerably less self-righteous frame of mind.

Once we acknowledge the historical failure of anarchism (which is not to repudiate our anti-authoritarian critique of other ostensibly revolutionary currents) we can begin the work of rebuilding a revolutionary libertarian movement.

## **Anarchism and the Revolutionary Movement**

I believe that if we want to understand the moment we are in we need to understand ourselves as one part of a much broader revolutionary project of human liberation that everywhere around the world has either been defeated or is in retreat. The revolutionary movement is not defined by the embrace of a particular ideology, but rather by the objective movement of oppressed people resisting their oppression and fighting for a world free from oppression. Over time this movement has taken many twists and turns and has, at least ideologically, branched off in a number of directions. It has found expression through a variety of ideological forms (anarchism, marxism, feminism, revolutionary nationalism, liberation theology). At every moment in its history the revolutionary movement has contained the contradictions of the authoritarian society from which it is constantly being reborn. So its every theoretical and organizational expression has always contained both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary, both liberatory and oppressive, both libertarian and authoritarian aspects and potentialities.

As anarchists we have tended to divide the left neatly into libertarian and authoritarian camps. I believe the terms of this division correctly identify the essence of the contradictions that constantly reappear in the revolutionary movement. But I also think that there has been a general

tendency to make this division in a mechanical way. There is a tendency, for example, to view the split in the 1<sup>st</sup> International between Marx and Bakunin as setting the terms by which we analyze the whole intervening historical experience. As the inheritors of Bakunin's anarchism we uphold the good works of all anarchists since him and ritualistically denounce the actions of all Marxists in the same period. The consequence of this is to blind ourselves to the counter-revolutionary elements in anarchist theory and practice and the legitimate accomplishments of many marxists (or other "authoritarian" currents).

In opposition to this mechanical or scholastic approach I believe we should look at the whole experience of the revolutionary movement dialectically. We need to identify the aspects of anarchism that effectively crippled it as a credible revolutionary alternative to marxism. We need to examine when and how liberatory currents asserted themselves within marxism. We need to look at the various questions that distinguish various currents within the revolutionary movement. We need to look at these questions not simply in the abstract but in the real historical conditions in which they arose and developed. We need to look not just at the few times anarchists have played a significant role in a revolutionary situation but at all the revolutions of the past century.

Many anarchists, of course, have been willing to embrace particular episodes (workers councils in post-WW1 Europe, Hungary '56, the Shanghai Commune, France May-June '68, Portugal '74) in which explicitly anarchist forces were not major players, as part of the revolutionary libertarian tradition. Obviously this broadens the points of historical reference and is for the good. But the short-lived nature of each of these experiences means that by blaming the appropriate Stalinists or social-democrats for their betrayals, it is possible to avoid answering the harder questions sometimes posed more sharply by those episodes in which clearly defined libertarian forces did not participate.

## **Objective Conditions**

It is practically anarchist dogma that every revolutionary situation has the potential to become an authentic libertarian revolution. On the basis of this position the failure of any situation to develop in such a direction is the consequence of the authoritarianism of the various ostensibly revolutionary organizations and parties. The suggestion that the "objective conditions" faced by various revolutionary movements account for the turns they took is routinely ridiculed by anarchists as simply making excuses for the crimes of those authoritarian forces. And certainly there is no shortage of cases in which the suppression of the workers movement, political executions, the imprisonment of dedicated revolutionaries, and so on have been dismissed with casual reference to the "objective conditions." But this does not mean that objective conditions haven't imposed insurmountable obstacles for the revolutionary movement.

Revolutionary situations do not present themselves to us only after we have made perfect preparations for them. They arise suddenly when the old order is unable to maintain its rule. It would be irresponsible in such situations not to try to carry out a thorough libertarian social revolution. But it isn't necessarily the case that it is always actually possible to win everything we want. In this case the revolution will be confronted with choosing between different kinds of compromises or half-measures in order to "survive."

The question that confronts revolutionaries is never simply whether the workers (or peasants) are capable of taking control of the means of production, and reorganizing production on democratic and libertarian lines (like the workers and peasants collectives in Spain). Nor is it even whether they are capable of establishing within cities and villages organs of self-government (as in the many cases of workers councils). From the Paris Commune to the Zapatista rebellion we know that these things can be done.

The question is almost always whether they can do these things over a prolonged period of time under conditions of war and general social breakdown. These are the conditions under which revolutionary opportunities are most likely to occur. It is precisely under these conditions that the limits of the revolutionary movement as a whole have revealed themselves.

Anarchists often like to pose the “social revolution” in contrast to the merely “political revolution.” For the purpose of distinguishing real social upheavals from mere coup d’états this distinction might be useful. But almost all the “political revolutions” so criticized in fact involved significant elements of social revolution. More importantly it is impossible to imagine a “social revolution” devoid of all the features of a “political revolution.” A revolution is a struggle for power and is inevitably a messy affair. If we are not prepared for the fact that future revolutionary situations are going to present us with unpleasant choices then we are not really interested in making revolution.

## **Attitude Adjustment Time**

I want to put forward here several connected propositions on the nature of the revolutionary project that I believe challenge some basic anarchist prejudices. The first proposition is that in a world characterized by gross disparities in the level of economic development as a consequence of imperialism it has simply not been possible to overthrow capitalism in most (if not all) of the imperialized countries. Revolutions in those countries have been of necessity capitalist (and usually state capitalist) revolutions that have swept away certain (horribly oppressive) pre-capitalist features of those societies and renegotiated the terms of capitalist exploitation.

The second proposition is that the achievement of a stateless classless society within the territorial limits of a single country (or otherwise defined territory) in a world of nation-states is impossible. Revolutions so confined to a national territory become national revolutions or are crushed. National revolutions can accomplish certain things but not others. The replacement of the old state apparatus with a new ostensibly revolutionary state is necessary to secure many of those accomplishments but we should have no illusions about such a state “withering away” on its own accord. It too will have to be smashed. One of the main things that national revolutions give people is experience in the process of making revolution and a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of revolutions.

The third proposition (related closely to the second) is that a regular army can only be defeated by another army. Militias or other irregular forms of military organization alone, while capable of heroic resistance, will ultimately collapse before a regular army. The collapse of a national army (almost always precipitated by a military defeat) can create an opening for a revolutionary movement. But if that movement does not create its own army the old order will reconstitute its army or a foreign power will do it for them.



The fourth proposition is that only one class has the potential to overthrow capitalism — the international working class. It must act in conjunction with other classes and social movements to win and the participation of those forces is crucial to carrying out the most thoroughgoing social change, but the working class organized as a revolutionary class is the only single force without which the overthrow of capitalism is absolutely impossible. The fight against patriarchy and racial/national oppression within the working class is necessary for achieving unity within the class.

The rest of this paper will deal with these four propositions in light of the history of revolutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Unequal Development**

Capitalism is a world system. If certain elements of capitalism appeared initially in the relative isolation of particular national settings, they only came together to form what we would recognize as capitalism as the result of the unparalleled global integration of trade that began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the European conquest of the Americas and domination of the trade routes of the Indian Ocean, and the establishment of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and plantation complex. From its inception capitalism has enriched certain countries and enabled them to revolutionize production by looting and subjugating other countries to the economic needs of the ruling classes of the imperialist mother countries. Initially this relationship took the form of extracting wealth from largely self-sufficient societies. Over time it developed into a relationship of dependency in which the imperialized countries were not only a source of raw materials but also crucial markets for finished goods. This dependency meant the deliberate destruction of the self-sufficiency of the imperialized countries. More recently certain imperialized countries have become centers of manufacture within a global market. Dependency on the imperialist centers has been maintained so far through control of developmental capital (the IMF and the World Bank) and the specialization of different types of manufacture in different countries.

The consequences of this unequal development for the project of anti-capitalist revolution are huge. Until recently the exploitation of much of the Third World was carried out through pre-capitalist economic forms (usually and imprecisely called semi-feudal) plugged into and subordinate to the world capitalist market. This meant that the antagonism between capitalism and the producers in much of the world took the immediate form of unequal distribution of land and the resulting super-exploitive landlord-tenant relations.

China is a good example of this. In other areas forced labor was used (as in many parts of Africa under colonialism) or plantation agriculture existed side by side with the peasant economy (as in Cuba). Capitalist forms of production constituted a small fraction of the economy and involved an even smaller fraction of the population. Moreover many of the capitalists involved in this small sector understood that the semi-feudal structure of the society and the domination of their country by the imperialists was an impediment to their own interests. They were potential allies of any peasant movement to seize the land and overthrow the landlords.

The Chinese Revolution must be understood in this context. It was overwhelmingly a peasant revolution that destroyed a very rotten old system, redistributed the land, and established China's relative economic independence from imperialist domination. Only once these fundamental tasks had been carried out did it even become possible for the Chinese Communist Party to talk about

what to do with China's puny capitalist sector. The cities had been controlled by the Kuomintang and the only significantly industrialized region, Manchuria, had been under Japanese control. The industrial proletariat, such as it was, did not have either the experience or the organization to take matters into their own hands. Any move to do so would need the active support if not of the peasantry, then of the Communist Party.

Development of industry was crucial to solving a number of China's most pressing problems. The lack of transportation and communications meant that famine-plagued regions were difficult to reach with relief. Mass production techniques were necessary to meet the huge demand for the most rudimentary farm implements (ploughs, carts) and to raise agricultural productivity sufficiently to break the constant cycle of famine. Superficially it might seem like this is an argument that a problem with social-structural causes (famine) required only a technological solution. But the social-structural causes (feudal land structure and dependency on foreign manufactures) expressed themselves significantly in the low technological level of agrarian China. The land could simply not sustain its then current population without a technological as well as a social revolution.

In this context the section of the capitalists who had sided with the agrarian revolution were crucial. They concentrated technical and managerial expertise without which the development of new industry would have been impossible. To simply expropriate them would have meant to drive them into the arms of the Kuomintang. Could the workers who had worked under them take up the slack and run existing enterprises? To a certain extent. But it should be kept in mind that in the wake of a civil war many enterprises were operating sporadically and the workers with the technical expertise to run them weren't necessarily easily found. More importantly the Chinese proletariat was hardly a mature class with a lengthy experience of common struggle informing its self-activity.

But the question wasn't simply one of running the existing enterprises, it was one of dramatically and immediately expanding the industrial base to forestall famine and for that the expertise of the tiny capitalist class was indispensable.

Time was of the essence. The expansion of industry was also necessary to prevent the masses of landless peasants who had crowded the cities as a result of famine and war from returning to a countryside that wasn't prepared to absorb them. Furthermore there was a significant threat of foreign invasion or a U.S. backed Kuomintang invasion from Taiwan. During the Korean War MacArthur openly threatened to invade China.

Furthermore we need to confront the limited political capacities of the peasantry. Could the Chinese peasantry have abolished capitalist relations (wage labor in particular) and set about a non-capitalist process of development to solve their considerable problems? The peasantry had accomplished many things. On the village level they had taken over control of the administration of village affairs from the corrupt landlord elites and had carried out the dramatic redistribution of land. Leaving aside for the moment the crucial role of the Communist Party in these accomplishments we can note that this peasant control of administration extended to greater and lesser degrees upwards to the county or even provincial level. But as one moves up the hierarchy one encounters more and more reliance on the Communist Party cadres, and more and more reliance on educated cadres from non-peasant backgrounds.

We can interpret this fact two ways. On the one hand it is an expression of the ultimate dominance of the Communist Party and its regime by a relative handful of intellectuals from middle-class or landlord backgrounds. On the other it is a simple reflection of the fact that the over-

whelming majority of the Chinese peasants were illiterate and that the literate supporters of the revolution (whether of non-peasant background or taught to read by the Party or the People's Liberation Army) were in the Party. These different ways of looking at the same fact are not contradictory. Together they reveal the class character the Chinese Revolution had and also why it probably couldn't have had any other.

The Council Communist Anton Pannekoek in his 1940 article "Why Past Revolutionary Movements Have Failed" linked the inherently capitalist nature of revolutions in the periphery to the problems of the proletarian revolution in the imperialist centers. He argued that the underdevelopment of Russia meant that the capitalist revolution there could not be carried out by the bourgeoisie but rather by a new bureaucratic capitalist class drawn mainly from the intelligentsia. This new capitalist class leveraged the prestige of the thwarted proletarian revolution in Russia to dominate the revolutionary workers movement in the West and thereby diverting the self-organization of the proletariat in the most advanced capitalist countries. This is one way in which the unequal development of capitalism has resulted in the unequal development of the revolutionary movement. Pannekoek doesn't deal with the role of imperialist super-profits in effectively buying off at least a section of the workers movement, but that fact too must inform our understanding of why the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been characterized not by international proletarian revolution but by peasant-based national capitalist revolutions.

Only as an abstraction can freedom be absolute. In the real world freedom is always conditioned by the social context in which it exists. Freedom can not be defined simply in terms of the absence of constraint but must also refer to the power to make the decisions that affect one's life. It is impossible to rule a society if you don't understand how it works. So, in a hunter-gatherer society that sort of power depends on different things than it does in an industrialized society. A crucial feature of class societies is that they deny the exploited classes access to the things they would need to rule. Revolutions in a certain sense are the process by which an oppressed class obtains those things. But, because class societies inevitably combine old and new methods of exploitation, different oppressed classes are better positioned to make the revolutionary leap and to take control of society.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the technological level of society was such that one could perhaps imagine the peasantry taking control of society as a whole and establishing some sort of agrarian communism. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is an impossibility (though Pol Pot gave it a shot). The peasant is enmeshed in a global system of capitalism, the deeper workings of which are obscured from the vantage point of life in a small village. In contrast the urban worker is exposed in a thousand ways to the complex operations of the world system. The problem of course is that, as a consequence of the unequal development of capitalism around the world, it has been the life conditions of the peasant and not the proletarian that have fueled the major revolutions of the century. But precisely because the peasantry as a class is so poorly prepared to administer a capitalist society (even an underdeveloped one), that those revolutions have ultimately carried new minority ruling classes to power.

## **Anarchism in One Country?**

The Spanish Revolution and its suppression demonstrated in the starkest terms one of the central problems of anarchism. The Spanish Revolution was the product not simply of the global

class struggle, but of its particular features in Spain. A particular chain of events reflecting the particular character and history of Spain lead up to the moment when the Spanish peasants and workers were able to seize control of the fields, factories and workshops. Every revolution arises from the failure of a particular state in a particular moment. In Spain the Republican government crumbled in the wake of Franco's military revolt. Power was lying in the street, and the anarchist movement, the most powerful force among the workers and peasants, took it.

I am emphasizing the particularly Spanish character of the Spanish Revolution to make clear the simple fact that while the Revolution was able to count on a certain amount of international solidarity, the conditions that had produced the revolution were not to be found elsewhere and therefore the prospects for the revolution to spread were limited. But that didn't mean that the Revolution took place in isolation. Italian and German fascism sent troops, arms, and planes to support Franco's armies. The Soviet Union leveraged its support for the Republic for the creation and control of a counter-revolutionary regular army. If the Republican Government couldn't subdue the Revolution and the fascists couldn't drown it in blood there is no reason to expect that other foreign powers wouldn't intervene. Their short-term interests in retrieving control over expropriated enterprises and their long-term interests in preventing the Revolution from becoming an international example meant they would have no choice but to intervene militarily.

There are basically two reasons it is impossible to create a stateless classless society within the confines of single country. The first is economic and the second is military.

The economic reasons are important. As discussed above capitalism is a world system. This means that no country is self-sufficient. Obviously some countries have more or less potential for self-sufficiency, but certain problems are effectively universal. Some countries, as a consequence of their population, simply could not hope to meet their own food needs. This is the case for many of the smaller more densely populated industrialized countries. Some countries, as a consequence of their underdevelopment under colonialism, don't have the means of producing manufactured goods (clothing, tractors, etc..) on which they depend. And practically all countries are dependent on at least a few strategic minerals that simply don't exist within their borders. Chromium, for example, is necessary for all sorts of machine parts. It is concentrated largely in Southern Africa. Similarly much of the world is dependent on foreign petroleum.

The point here isn't that one can't imagine the eventual creation of a self-sufficient economy within a particular country, but rather that the economies that revolutionaries inherit are not self-sufficient and the severing of international trade (by either the revolutionary forces or by foreign powers) will have very disruptive consequences. These are two-sided. First, industries that depend on foreign materials will stop functioning and people will no longer have access to goods that are only available from abroad. Second, economic sectors that produce for the international market, will either cease to produce or will produce goods for which there is no domestic demand.

The situation of Cuba is instructive here. Many of the economic problems that confronted the Cuban Revolution would have been just as present if that revolution had a libertarian character. Cuba's economy was classically dependent. Sugar and tourism brought in the cash with which to purchase foreign goods including food, medicine, clothing, petroleum, and automobiles. In the intervening 37 years it is a scandalous consequence of the relations developed with the Soviet Union that Cuba has not converted its agricultural sector to become self-sufficient in food. The result is that Cuba now faces the same problem it would have faced then: how to make that conversion without access to foreign capital. The technology involved in growing, harvesting

and processing sugar is not the same as that involved in producing rice or produce. It is not a simple matter to knock down all the sugar cane and begin growing grains and vegetables. It takes time to get a whole new kind of agriculture going. How are people going to eat in the meantime?

The practical answer inevitably is that dependence on the world market can only be reduced in steps. But so long as people are producing for the world market they can not be said to have smashed class society altogether — they continue to be exploited by an international capitalist class. To make matters worse the refusal of parts of the world market to trade (as in the case of the U.S. embargo of Cuba) drives down the price that the goods will command on the world market. The only way to recover that lost profit (for there is no point in engaging in international trade if it doesn't generate profits that can be invested in making the country self-sufficient) is to raise the level of exploitation of the producers. Worse, the administrative apparatus of the revolutionary regime, whether it is called a "workers state" or "a federation of free collectives" is the body that must do the exploiting. Good intentions are feeble protection against the logic of the world market. How does the apparatus respond when the producers, entirely in the spirit of the revolution, say that they will not be exploited and go on strike?

This is precisely the dilemma that has confronted every revolution that has survived longer than a year. For avowed statisticians like Marxists it is not much of a dilemma. But for anarchists it is profound.

The second obstacle to the creation of a stateless classless society in a single country is military. Thoroughgoing social revolutions, even if contained in a single country, are a profound threat to the international capitalist order. Every such revolution that has not been crushed internally has had to face some degree of foreign military intervention. The motivations of the individual countries don't even have to be so farsighted as the maintenance of world capitalism. Often enough the revolution threatens foreign investments that the foreign power decides it must defend. Even when this is not the case the turmoil of a revolution can seem like a golden opportunity for a foreign power to establish or widen its foothold in a country.

There is no reason to suppose that if the Russian Revolution had taken a different course (if the anarchists had gotten their shit together, or if the Soviets had been able to resist subordination to the Bolshevik Party structure), that it wouldn't have faced invasions by 14 foreign powers in support of the Whites in the civil war.

It is impossible to repel a foreign invasion without a military force of one's own. Making war, even a war of resistance, has a certain authoritarian logic to it. War is about killing people and sending some people off to die so that others might live. It is, unfortunately, not mainly about killing the class enemy, but rather about killing the other oppressed people, often conscripts, who make up the enemies army. Even if one's strategy depends on mutiny or mass defections within the enemies army it will still be necessary to kill people. The reason is simple. Soldiers mutiny or defect in significant numbers only when the threat of being killed in battle is plausibly greater than the threat of being shot for insubordination. This is the smart thing to do. Therefore armies maintain their internal discipline in part by convincing their troops that being shot for insubordination is a certainty. For an army to fall apart it must face some sort of military defeat.

Anarchists sometimes claim that decentralized, non-authoritarian structures are inherently so much more efficient than centralized authoritarian ones that these principles should be applied to military operations. This is the express route to anarchist martyrdom. If anarchist principles can accommodate turning groups of human beings into efficient killing machines there is a problem. But if they can't there is another problem. It is the second situation that we face: making war

means compromising anti-authoritarian principles. In so far as a military force has as its aim the defeat of other military forces within a given territory it is acting to create a monopoly on organized violence — a defining feature of the state. Is it possible to create a truly anti-authoritarian military structure that corresponds with the relative decentralism of a libertarian society and that is able to defend that society from external (or internal) military threats? I will try to answer that question in the next section.

## **The Revolutionary Army**

The anarchist movement has basically two major experiences with trying to organize its military power in defense of its revolutionary gains: in Ukraine and in Spain.

The anarchist literature on the Ukrainian experience is considerably less extensive than that on the Spanish experience, but a couple points are worth making about it. While the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine (Makhnovists) conducted massive collectivization of land in the zones of its control, the Ukrainian peasantry was not heavily imbued with anarchist thinking. The Makhnovist movement rose up as a result of the Brest-Litovsk agreement in which the Bolsheviks ceded Ukraine to Austrian and German Imperialism. But like the rest of the old Russian empire Ukraine was in the throes of a social revolution as the peasantry was seizing the land. The Ukrainian Confederation of Anarchist Organizations (Nabat) saw in this situation an opportunity to build under anarchist leadership a military force that might carry forward the revolution and expel the foreign imperialists. And that is precisely what they did before they were crushed by the Bolshevik Red Army.

The Ukrainian peasantry embraced anarchism in so far as the anarchist army could protect what they had won in the revolution. The Insurgent Army was a guerilla army. It operated within a region about 150 miles in diameter, populated by 7,000,000 people. In organization it stood midway between the sort of indigenous “bandit” formations that consistently arise from peasants in remote or unstable regions and what I will later define as a mature revolutionary army. It did not have the same worked out anti-authoritarian structure as the anarchist militias in Spain started out with.

Once the Makhnovists had defeated the White forces of Generals Deniken and Wrangel they were in turn defeated by the Red Army. The territory controlled by the Makhnovists was highly unstable. It was subject to periodic occupation by White and foreign forces. The tenacity of the Makhnovists resistance led to the disintegration of the White forces and the withdrawal of the foreign ones. The Red Army was beating down and absorbing irregular peasant forces all over the former Russian empire. Makhno’s proved the most difficult to defeat, but ultimately they too fell.

The military reasons are straightforward. Irregular forces like Makhno’s can sustain themselves perhaps indefinitely in geographically remote hinterlands. But Ukraine was not such a region. The Brest-Litovsk agreement and the general social collapse of Russia created a momentary opening into which Makhno’s forces stepped. But the consolidation of Bolshevik rule in the rest of Russia and the decision of the imperialists to abandon Ukraine meant the closing of that window. It is important to note that in spite of all the anarchist slogans the program of the Makhnovists in practice was not much different from that of later peasant revolutions (like the

Chinese), namely: redistribution of the land, more or less voluntary collectivization, and expulsion of the imperialists (national independence).

If there is any doubt that the Ukrainian Revolution was limited in what it could hope to achieve within its own borders the words of the Nabat in calling for the creation of the Insurgent Army should settle the matter:

“4. With regard to the external attack on the social revolution by Western and other imperialist powers, the anarchists have always relied and will continue to rely not on the regular Red Army, not even on an insurgent war, but on the inevitable collapse of imperialism and its armed forces through the unfolding world-wide revolution”

It shouldn't be necessary to note that there wasn't anything inevitable about the collapse of imperialism on which the Ukrainian anarchists were relying.

The Spanish Revolution had a somewhat different character. Almost 70 years of anarchist education and agitation had prepared significant sections of the Spanish working class and peasantry for a libertarian revolution. When the moment came in July 1936 millions of Spaniards had in their minds what the anarchist reorganization of their society would entail. And they applied the same libertarian principles to the military formations they created: the militias.

The militias were drawn from various factories or neighborhoods or villages and each one had a distinct identity in accordance with its origins. The militias were organized into columns which in turn elected delegates that were to carry out some of the functions of officers, but without the automatic authority that officers commanded. The anarchists were not the only ones to organize militias. The socialist workers of the UGT, and the various parties like the POUM, also organized militias.

The militias, at least initially, were the picture of decentralism and non-authoritarianism. And the military consequences were disastrous. Anarchist accounts of the operations of the militias heavily overemphasize their occasional heroic victories and minimize their frequent defeats or simply blame them on the refusal of other forces to provide them with the arms they needed. But while the militias certainly fought courageously, their decentralism and lack of discipline was as much their downfall as the “treachery” of organizations that never should have been trusted in the first place.

Anarchists studying Spain should be careful about taking their own propaganda too seriously. The lack of internal discipline made for acts of tremendous stupidity from a military point of view. Militia members would regularly abandon their positions when boredom set in. The absence of any sort of unified command structure meant that every proposed coordinated military action involving different militias, let alone ones from different political tendencies, had to be discussed and modified and approved before it could be carried out. In this process crucial time was often wasted and military opportunities lost. When coordinated actions were carried out the modified plans were often greatly reduced in scale, often to the point of making them irrelevant. Militias jealously refused to share materiel with each other. Observers of all perspectives noted how militias of each organization took a certain delight in the defeats suffered by the militias of other organizations.

The simple fact of the matter is that wars can not be won in this way. Militias can play an important role in defending the gains of a revolution, in organizing irregular warfare within a circumscribed region, and in suppressing counter-revolutionary activity within the zone of a revolution. But without a regular army of its own the revolution can not hold back the advances of an invading army.

The reasons are simple and it is borne out by the whole history of military conflict. An army with a unified command going up against a “decentralized” force will set about to identify its weakest units and concentrate its first attacks accordingly. The decentralized forces lacking a unified command will be unable to quickly redeploy troops to the weak area in the way that a regular army can. Similarly when a coordinated offensive needs to be carried out certain troops will be put in considerably greater danger than others. In a decentralized structure such decisions are subject to rejection by the units most likely (or even certain) to take the heaviest losses. This means that the decentralized military structure can only deploy its most courageous or selfless units in such situations. It’s not difficult to see how such a practice would result in the rapid weakening of the decentralized structure as it sacrifices its best forces or backs off from battles that can be won. Conversely the boldest units in a decentralized force are more likely to expend themselves in heroic but ultimately pointless acts of self-sacrifice.

There is a reason that the world is dominated by regular armies with unified command structures. It is not because the states of the world simply find their authoritarian form more agreeable in spite of its comparative military inefficiencies. If that were so states would be constantly striving to obtain the benefits of decentralism in military matters (as they sometimes do in other matters in which decentralism is in fact more efficient). But the military remains the most centralized institution in any society, it authoritarianism the model by which less authoritarian institutions are judged.

One can of course conceive of a perfectly functioning decentralized military structure in which the grasp of military science is so evenly spread out that it makes no errors and goes on to win. But in the real world all such plans run into friction from the flesh and blood people who are supposed to carry them out. Wars are won not by those who concoct perfect plans, but rather by those whose plans are best able to absorb the consequences of their own imperfection. In military matters a reliable command structure enables the most rapid response to setbacks.

If we are ready to concede (as the Spanish anarchists ultimately did) that making war involves compromising anti-authoritarian principles we need to look at precisely what measures need to be taken to prevent those compromises from undoing the whole revolutionary project. It seems that there are a number of basic things here: the election of officers, the elimination of unnecessary social distinctions between officers and their troops, a commitment to developing the leadership skills of the rank and file in opposition to relying on officers from the old regime and the like. But these things can’t hide the fundamentally authoritarian nature of an army: absolute subordination to the command structure, drills that psychologically prepare soldiers to take orders, the suspension of basic democratic rights in the course of military engagements and so on.

Recognizing the necessity of an army doesn’t mean accepting any old army. One of the central issues in the Spanish Revolution was the attempt to incorporate the militias into a new regular Republican army. Much of the impetus for this militarization came from the Communist Party, which by virtue of its connections with the Soviet Union, was prepared to dominate the command of such an army. The anarchist and POUM militias resisted this process in varying degrees. Ultimately most of the anarchist militias were either incorporated into the new army or broken up by it. One group that resisted militarization were the militias at the Gelsa front. Instead of joining the army they returned to Barcelona and constituted themselves as the Friends of Durruti. The Friends of Durruti played a pivotal role in the May 1937 events in Barcelona, calling on the anarchist forces to maintain their barricades when the CNT leadership was preaching



conciliation with the Communists. After these events the Friends of Durruti issued a pamphlet "Towards a Fresh revolution" that analyzed the defeat of the Spanish Revolution and put forward proposals for its regeneration. Unlike anarchists today who see the Spanish militias as the model of anarchist military organization the Friends of Durruti had seen them in action and proposed in opposition to either the Republican army or an exclusive reliance on the militias the revolutionary army:

"With regard to the problem of the war, we back the idea of the army being under the absolute control of the working class. Officers with their origins in the capitalist regime do not deserve the slightest trust from us. Desertions have been numerous and most of the disasters we have encountered can be laid down to obvious betrayals by officers. As to the army, we want a revolutionary one led exclusively by workers; and should any officer be retained, it must be under the strictest supervision."

In this quote there is the usual anarchist equivocations. The defeats of the militias are the result of betrayals, but the solution is a revolutionary army. We want the workers in control but we know we will need the expertise of professional officers. This is nonetheless a considerable improvement on the naive celebration of the militias that passes for anarchist military thinking today.

The question of the character of an authentically revolutionary army is important. The Friends of Durruti correctly identify the class character of the army and its command as crucial in determining its role in the revolution. So far we have spoken of the army entirely in its role as defender of gains already made by the revolution. The obvious next question is what role can a revolutionary army play in enlarging the revolutionary zone, in effect bringing the revolution to new areas. This would certainly have been a question if a revolutionary army in Spain had been able to defeat Franco's forces and take territory that had up to that point not been touched by the Revolution.

Historically many armies have started out with revolutionary objectives. John Ellis's *Armies in Revolution*, is a valuable treatment of much of that experience from the point of view of a military historian. Ellis argues that every revolutionary army from Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army to and including the Soviet Red Army was an army in the service of a minority class. He upholds the achievements of Makhno's Insurgent Army in the face of criticisms by the Bolsheviks. He doesn't treat the Spanish Revolution (perhaps because it offers no example of an authentically revolutionary army). Finally he points to the People's Liberation Army in China as the single example of an army that carried out the revolutionary class program of the oppressed majority, namely the comprehensive redistribution of land to the poor peasantry. I have argued earlier that the Chinese Revolution was ultimately a capitalist revolution, and I would argue that the PLA carried out, at least up until 1949, a program that was consistent with the common interests of the peasantry and the aspiring new capitalist class represented by the leaders of the Communist Party. In spite of these qualifications I would argue that the Chinese experience is still an important one from the point of view of trying to develop a revolutionary libertarian military strategy.

## **The Revolutionary Class**

The problems posed by the Chinese experience are fundamentally the product of China's underdevelopment and the fact that the only class that can hope to overthrow capitalism, the pro-

letariat, was almost absent from the Chinese political landscape. I have referred earlier to the problems posed by a class which developed historically under pre-capitalist conditions taking over a national economy that is already integrated into world capitalism. There is in anarchism a certain tendency in upholding peasant revolts to avoid their inherent limitations. Whatever the situation once was it should be clear now as the globalization of capitalism accelerates out of the control of any single national capital that the only class that has a hope to take on this system is the international working class. The overwhelmingly middle-class composition of the anarchist movement in the U.S., and the dogmatic invocation of the working class by the various marxist sects, make many anarchists reluctant to take an explicit stand in favor of a working class orientation. Instead the working class is seen as one of many points of reference or “identities” that taken together are going to carry out the revolutionary process. The pluralism of this position is its singular virtue. But by treating economic classes in the same ways that we treat ethnic or sexual identities we lose sight of the fact that it is capitalism that couples oppression with a profit-generating exploitation that fuels its constant and dynamic expansion into new territories and new areas of our lives (including ethnic and sexual identity).

Immigration and the transnational movements of capital are increasingly making the abstract notion of an international proletariat a lived reality for hundreds of millions of people. The rapid urbanization of the Third World increasingly means that it is the proletariat and not the peasantry in those countries that is best positioned to challenge neo-colonialism. The proletariat should not be viewed as a monolithic entity represented by a single party (a la the various currents of Marxism) but rather as a contested body whose unity is contingent on the freedom of its different parts to fight for their interests within it. The fight for women’s liberation or the recognition of the rights of various ethnic groups then are not battles to be put off until after the proletariat seizes power globally, but are necessary precursors to that seizure of power that clarify the revolutionary orientation of the proletariat.

## Conclusion

I have sought in this paper to draw out some of the failures of the anarchist movement. I am not arguing here for the abandonment of a generally anti-authoritarian orientation, or a modification of the ultimate goals of anarchism. I am arguing however that the viability of those goals is contingent on a number of factors and that anarchists have resisted facing these political realities with the result that anarchism has withered as a credible revolutionary alternative to the failed ideologies of marxism and the various nationalisms.

It is not clear to me that anarchism, as defined by its historical practice over the past century, offers an adequate framework for rebuilding the revolutionary project on libertarian foundations. It is clear to me that while the historical experience of marxism is invaluable, and while marxism offers important analytical tools for understanding the world we live in, that marxism as an overarching philosophical framework has proven to be irretrievably authoritarian.

There is a crying need for the development of a new body of revolutionary theory that breaks decisively with the dogmatism and political shallowness of anarchism as well as with the authoritarian essence of marxism.

Any new theoretical approach to the revolutionary project must confront not just the important historical experiences addressed in this paper but also the new conditions we face, in par-

ticular the new possibilities for building authentically international revolutionary organizations rooted in an increasingly mobile and international working class.

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Chris Day  
The Historical Failure of Anarchism  
Implications for the Future of the Revolutionary Project  
1996

Retrieved on 2 September 2015 from [loveandrage.org](http://loveandrage.org).  
This essay marked the beginning of the split that would dissolve the Love and Rage  
Revolutionary Anarchist Federation. Love and Rage member Ron Tabor wrote a critical  
response to this essay shortly after Day's was published: [blackrosefed.org](http://blackrosefed.org).

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