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Review: Black Flame and the anarchist tradition

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Title: *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*

Author: Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt

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A GLOBAL MOVEMENT

Although Spain is the most well known site of anarchist power, it was no exception. The Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm had explained away the power of the Spanish anarchist movement as due to an irregularity in ‘Spanish character’. Instead we see that anarchism was present and prominent throughout the world, from the Pacific Rim to the Southern Cone, with anarchists at the forefront of strong class movements wherever they were. Indeed, the point is made that anarchism’s period of strength, from 1880 to the 1920s coincided with the globalisation of the world economy, and it was the free movement of labour that was the source of much of its power. Militants were often expelled from home countries only to organise in the colonies, and anarchists and syndicalists were the first to create multi-racial unions in Africa and the Americas, advancing class unity and organisation.

In the current phase of globalisation, then, the authors hope that such strength can be found again, that the current crisis of progressive politics can give way to “*a multiracial and international movement with a profound feminist impulse, a movement with an important place in union, worker, and rural struggles, prizing reason over superstition, justice over hierarchy, self-management over state power, international solidarity over nationalism, a universal human community over parochialism and separatism*”. For all those on the left, this book will provide a valuable introduction to, and explication of, anarchist thought, with a powerful assertion of its historical and intellectual depth as well as its continuing relevance to the project of human emancipation. For anarchists, this will be a remarkable synthesis of movement history, a spur for additional research and study. But most of all, it is a powerful assertion of the value of our tradition, as a guide in strategic debate and a continuing source of inspiration.

emphasis, the authors argue, indicates that syndicalism should be understood as an element of the broad anarchist tradition, and thus that syndicalists can be claimed as part of this tradition. While this assertion may have surprised Marxist syndicalists such as James Connolly or Daniel De Leon, the broad argument for syndicalism as the progeny of anarchism is well-made.

Anarchist activism and influence within the union movement reached its peak between the 1890s and 1920s, and there was much debate about how this involvement could best be turned to building a revolutionary movement. A common emphasis the authors find is *“the project of creating a revolutionary counterculture within the popular classes.”*

COUNTER-POWER AND COUNTER-CULTURE

The unions were the most powerful arm of the workers movement, but they would not themselves, however democratic, lead the way to revolution. Instead anarchists must work within and outside such structures, to spread their ideas and build a revolutionary counter-culture among workers and peasants, an *“oppositional counter-public”*. Syndicalist unions would be capable of pursuing both reforms to improve daily life, but it would take conscious work from revolutionaries to ensure that they were also spaces for politicisation and education.

The authors find that the most powerful movements were those which spanned across many different spheres, and that libertarian *“schools, centres, media, and theatre”* all played a role in the politicisation and empowerment of the popular classes. The Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durruti wrote that *“we carry a new world in our hearts”*. The new world was not confined there, but could be found in the daily lives of millions, in the practices and institutions of working class counter-power.

This new history of anarchism provides a thorough and approachable examination of the tradition’s key ideas, debates and strategies, placing them in the context of the social struggles in which they arose. Anarchism is not blessed with the most attractive of brand names. While dictionaries and news media alike have successfully associated it with disorder and chaos, the anarchist political pantheon itself seems to share these traits; anarchism is label to both capitalists and communists, radical individualists and revolutionary socialists. What can ‘anarcho-capitalists’ such as Murray Rothbard have in common with revolutionaries such as Mikhail Bakunin and Piotr Kropotkin? Even the latter, among the most important of the movement’s theorists, himself claimed that anarchism’s political pedigree stretched back as far as Ancient Greek philosopher Xeno and Lao Tzu, the originator of Taoism. If one tries to and accommodate such a diversity of personas under this single term, the word loses all meaning.

It is understandable then, that the first task attempted in Black Flame is to define the tradition more clearly. The authors place it clearly and distinctly within the confines of revolutionary socialist thought from the 1860s onward, excluding the non-socialist elements often ascribed to anarchism. *“‘Class struggle’ anarchism, sometimes called revolutionary or communist anarchism, is not a type of anarchism; in our view, it is the only anarchism.”* The purpose of this act of definition is quite straightforward; having clearly defined what anarchism is, the authors can then explore its key elements and internal divisions, and outline a history that is coherent without being uniform. As the first instalment of a two-volume study, Black Flame focuses on the ideas of anarchism, and uses the historical background to clarify debates and strategy, leaving in-depth historical study to the sequel.

ANARCHISM VS. MARXISM

By sacrificing political breadth, Schmidt and van der Walt find intellectual depth, and the work undertakes a thorough exploration of the debates and questions that shaped anarchism, tracking the movement's engagement with other socialist currents, its internal debates, and its crucial points of development. They argue, contrary to some other radical writers, that despite familial connections between anarchism and Marxism, the differences are too deep for the two to be synthesised. The anarchist critique of Marx and Marxism is highlighted, emphasising the critical appropriation of elements of Marxian economics (Kropotkin notably challenged the Labour Theory of Value), while forcefully dismissing his conceptions of historical and political change.

The determinism of Marx's vision of progress through historical changes was attacked by Bakunin as both irrational and nationalistic, as seen in the former's advocacy of German and British imperialism as necessary preconditions for world revolution. Politically, Marx's conception of the Communist Party as the true representative of the working class, with the planned route to socialism passing via state rule was seen as meaning that Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat would become the dictatorship of the Party.

DISTINCTIONS WITHIN ANARCHISM

While these political distinctions from Marx and Marxism are shared by all anarchists, the level of strategy is itself the basis for distinctions within anarchism, between what the authors call 'mass anarchism', or strategy aimed at building and radicalising mass movements to create change, and insurrectionist anarchism, which emphasises violent action as the path to revolution. The violent assassinations and 'propaganda by the deed' of the late 19th and early 20th century marked the ascendancy of the insur-

rectionist strand, and anarchists were responsible for the murders of monarchs, industrialists and presidents throughout this period.

However, this tendency soon declined dramatically as militants realised its ineffectiveness; they had invited repression without advancing their influence. As Malatesta commented, "*these attentats, with the people insufficiently prepared for them, are sterile, and often, by provoking reactions which one is unable to control, produce much sorrow, and harm the very cause they were intended to serve.*" Other former advocates of insurrectionary strategy such as Kropotkin, Johann Most and Alexander Berkman turned instead to building a popular movement, deciding that "*the key strategy was to implant anarchism within popular social movements in order to radicalise them, spread anarchist ideas and aims, and foster a culture of self-management and direct action*". They would find in the emergent syndicalist movement the manifestation of their principles, "*anarchism made practical*".

ANARCHISM AND SYNDICALISM

The strategic turn to a gradual development of class strength is, for Schmidt and van der Walt, a turn back to the original lines of anarchist thought. Syndicalism, they stress, had been advocated by Bakunin and his followers in the First International, having argued that the International should strive to be an international labour federation not, as Marx wished, a grouping of political parties.

Again, there is opposing trends in history writing with which to engage. Some historians have attributed syndicalism to Sorel, a romantic French writer, while others have claimed it for Marxism. The authors point out that the former was entirely unconnected to the contemporary syndicalist movement, while Marx and Engels themselves had attributed syndicalism to Anarchism, lamenting the 'Bakunist' belief that the "general strike is the lever employed by which the social revolution is started." This continuing