

The colour brown: de-colonising anarchism and challenging white hegemony

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The appearance of the Egyptian Black Bloc in Cairo's streets in January 2013 triggered gullible excitement in Western anarchist circles. Little thought was given to the Egyptian Black Bloc's political vision – or lack thereof – tactics, or social and economic positions. For most Western anarchists, it was enough that they looked and dressed like anarchists to warrant uncritical admiration. Facebook pages of Israeli anarchists were swamped with pictures of Egyptian Black Bloc activists; skimming through the US anarchist blogosphere during that period would have given one the impression that the Black Bloc was Egypt's first-ever encounter with anarchism and anti-authoritarianism. But as American writer Joshua Stephens notes, the jubilant reaction many Western anarchists have towards the Black Bloc raises unflattering questions concerning their obsession with form and representation, rather than content and actions. And in this regard, these anarchists are not different from the Islamists who were quick to denounce the Black Bloc as blasphemous and infidel merely because they looked like Westerners. Further, many Western anarchist reactions to the Black Bloc unmask an entrenched orientalist tendency. Their disregard of Egypt and the Middle East's rich history of anarchism is one manifestation of this. As Egyptian anarchist, Yasser Abdullah illustrates, anarchism in Egypt dates back to the 1870's in response to the inauguration of the Suez Canal; Italian anarchists in Alexandria took part in the First International, published an anarchist journal in 1877, and took part in the Orabi revolution of 1881; Greek and Italian anarchists also organised strikes and protests with Egyptian workers. Yet these struggles are nonchalantly shunned by those who act today as if the Black Bloc is the first truly radical group to grace Egyptian soil.

This article argues that the shallow reception of the Black Bloc is but one example of how "white anarchism" has yet to break away from orientalist prejudices that plague the Western left more generally. I will demonstrate here that this failure can be attributed to the fact that anarchism has not gone through the complete process of decolonisation. I begin by showing that colonial attitudes made the Republicans of the Spanish Revolution neglect Spanish colonialism in North Africa, leading them to focus solely on fighting fascism at home. That the Spanish Revolution continues to serve as an important reference for today's anarchist movements, it is not surprising that similar colonial attitudes lead today's movements to write-off centuries of anti-authoritarian struggle in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Such an incomplete process of decolonisation also means that many Western anarchist movements and the dominant anarchist discourse remain overwhelmingly white and exclude people of colour. I will also show that, not only does "white anarchism" tend to ostracise people of colour, its emphasis on image and style leads to the marginalisation of people with disabilities and those who do not necessarily self-identify as anarchists despite being vehemently anti-authoritarian. Lastly, the article takes "Anarchists Against the Wall" as a specific example of the various flaws inflicting white anarchism, namely, exclusivity, elitism and the failure to challenge white-colonial privileges adequately.

A Look back at the Spanish revolution

Despite its eventual defeat, anarchists consider the Spanish revolution as an inspiring model for anarcho-syndicalism and non-hierarchical self-governance against all odds; it was a vastly asymmetrical war against a massive military machine that was supported and armed to the teeth by fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Nonetheless, no anarchist model, figure, or landmark is sacred relative to criticism (a virtue distinguishing anarchism from much of the traditional Left).

While it is an inspiring model, the Spanish revolution was far from a utopia, afflicted by many flaws and shortcomings. Although it is necessary to recognise these flaws – including the gross human rights violations committed by the Republicans, the forced alliance with the bourgeoisie and the Stalinists, the futile infightings, and other tactical mistakes – to do so here is beyond the scope of this article. Revolutionaries often do not have the luxury of choosing their allies. Left with no other choice, they are many times forced to accept the support of powers they ideologically oppose. But while recognising that one cannot expect a revolution to be entirely pure, it by no means condones mass executions and the clamp-down on religious freedoms. The one strategic and moral “mistake” that I wish to focus on here is how the issue of Spanish colonialism in Morocco and Western Sahara went completely and utterly swept under the blazing flames of revolution back home.

Exceedingly Immersed in their fight against fascism and tyranny in Spain, the revolutionaries ignored Spain’s colonialism, fascism and tyranny across the Mediterranean. The level of dehumanisation toward the “Other” was so high that, according to most pro-revolution narratives, the only role colonised Moroccans were given to play was one of mercenaries brought in by General Franco to crush the Popular Front. Much pro-revolution sentiment would go as far as referring to Moroccans in a racist manner. While it is difficult to argue that mutual solidarity between Spanish revolutionaries and colonised Moroccans could have changed the outcome of the War, it is also difficult to know whether this kind of solidarity was ever feasible in the first place. As the late American historian Howard Zinn puts it: “In the short run (and so far, human history has consisted only of short runs), the victims, themselves desperate and tainted with the culture that oppresses them, turn on other victims.” On the other hand, anarchism, in its essence, means rejecting and fighting against any form of authority and subjugation, including colonialism and occupation. To be truly anti-authoritarian, therefore, any struggle against fascism and dictatorship at home should be internationalist and cannot be separated from the struggle against fascism and tyranny abroad, in its role as a colonial power.

Returning to the Spanish revolution is fitting as we mark its 77th anniversary, because it seems that many anarchists have yet to internalise one of its key lessons. Exceptions notwithstanding, Western anarchist movements continue to be overwhelmingly white, unwittingly (or perhaps knowingly) orientalist, West-centric, even elitist, and unwelcoming of people who do not look like them. Thus, anti-authoritarian struggles in the Middle East, Africa and Asia are usually glossed over. It should be made clear, however, that anarchists of colour undoubtedly bear a large chunk of the responsibility for their relative lack of documentation. Maia Ramnath’s excellent book *Decolonizing Anarchism: An Antiauthoritarian History of India’s Liberation Struggle* and Ilham Khury Makdissi’s *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914*, are among few attempts to offer an alternative history of anti-authoritarianism in regions that get little attention.

Not a label

These books provide evidence that anti-authoritarian struggles in developing countries have existed long before the Black Bloc took to the streets of Egypt. Anarchism is not a label, a brand or a trademark, and turning it into a fashion statement does, perhaps, unrivalled damage to the movement. Anarchism is the unshakable belief, as Alexander Berkman writes, that “you should

be free; that no one should enslave you, boss you, rob you, or impose upon you. It means you should be free to do the things you want to do; and that you should not be compelled to do what you do not want to do.” However, the white intellectual obsession with “-isms” and the tendency to over-conceptualise and place people under static categories translates into the exclusion of many anarchists simply because they do not label themselves as such or they do not “look” anarchist.

The Un-labeled

This is perfectly embodied by the women I met in the July 15 protest in Beer es-Sab⁴. The protest was part of the Palestinian national strike against the Praver ethnic cleansing plan, a bill proposed by the Israeli Knesset that is set to displace 30,000–40,000 Palestinian-Bedouin natives in the Naqab desert; confiscate 800,000 dunams of their land; and demolish 35 so-called “unrecognised” Palestinian villages under the guise of “development.” Local women led the protest with their chants, blocked the road, and heroically stood their ground against Israeli occupation cops and Special Unit Police, who beat them and attacked them with batons. Fifteen year-old Rouya Hzayel smiled with great dignity when she was arrested in an iconic image that captured the defiance of Palestinian women. Following the initial attack by Israeli occupation police against the protest, demonstrators regrouped and resumed chanting militant slogans under female leadership. Patriarchal political “leaders” with masculine energy, those who typically dictate all protests in occupied Palestine, tried to disperse the protest to avoid further clashes with the Israeli police. But again, it was the Palestinian-Bedouin women who refused to go home or be silenced, shouting that the protest must go on until all detainees are released. Towards the end of the protest, which was rather small albeit crackling with feminist energy, an elderly Palestinian woman from Al-Araqib, a Palestinian-Bedouin village demolished 53 times in the last three years by the Israeli occupation, said: “When they demolish our homes, we turn the village’s graveyard into a home. They threaten to destroy it as well. Even if they do, we will dig graves in our own hands and live in them. We’ll protect our dead and they’ll protect us.”

In that one protest, the women of the occupied Naqab defied the colonial authority of the occupying State and the local patriarchal hegemony. They made a mockery of the orientalist stereotypes that deem Bedouin women voiceless and lacking agency. They insisted that they were free and not compelled to do what they did not want to do. Most of these women may have never heard of Emma Goldman or read Peter Kropotkin’s pamphlets; some of them can’t speak English. Yet they personified all that anti-authoritarianism essentially stands for. Nonetheless, these women and many more like them, will be excluded from the dominant Western anarchist discourse because they do not fit within the narrow and complex definitions, labels, and lifestyle.

Where are the disabled?

Another group typically marginalised in many anarchist circles are persons with disabilities. Persons with a physical disability may not be able to throw Molotov cocktails or form Black Blocs. They may not be able to lead an “anarchist” lifestyle or discard civilisation because their functioning lives heavily rely on modern technology. That does not mean they cannot be anti-authoritarian like any other able-bodied person. It means that they have particular circumstances

and needs that must be respected and integrated within the movement. They can organise direct actions, participate in sit-ins, lead civil disobedience, and turn their disability into an attribute and an advantage for the entire group. They should not be patronised or marginalised. Instead of telling them to go home or remain at the back, their comrades should put forth an effort to make the protest space accessible for them when possible. People with physical disabilities are usually excluded from anarchist movements or don't feel welcome and embraced. But for anarchism to be truly inclusive and heterogeneous, it must integrate and embrace all: people of colour, people with disability, the poor, the unaffiliated rebels, and those who do not necessarily fit within the readily-accepted Western definitions of anarchism, as we learned with the example in the Naqab above.

Anarchists against the wall

Widely praised and acclaimed as the most radical and revolutionary Israeli leftist group, Anarchists Against the Wall (AATW) perfectly exemplifies many of the aforementioned failures and shortcomings of "white anarchism." We may stand on the same side politically, since members of AATW oppose Zionism, support the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and believe in one democratic country in Historic Palestine. However, most of them have not critically come to terms with the reality of their white colonial privileges. This critique does not aim to evaluate or underestimate the group's work rate or commitment, nor does it question their moral courage and stamina. Rather, it aims to shed light on failures and shortcomings shared by most radical leftist white groups. This critique of AATW is twofold: (1) on an institutional level and (2) in questioning the group's participation in protests in the occupied West Bank.

Anarchists Against the Wall is a group strongly dominated by white, bourgeois, educated, and privileged Ashkenazi Israelis from the Tel Aviv bubble. It is a closed VIP club that does not apply direct democracy. Several activists who worked closely with the group complained that decisions are taken by a select few veteran members. They always emphasise that they "check their privileges" but they do not recognise that their privileges permeate their daily lives, allowing for them broader choices from how to move to where they live. For instance, taking the apartheid, settler-only 433 Road from Tel Aviv en route to a protest in the West Bank is neither revolutionary, nor does it defy the Israeli privilege. Going back from Ramallah to Jerusalem through the Hizmeh checkpoint, a special checkpoint for people with Israeli citizenship, is not revolutionary either. Travelling to protests in the West Bank to soothe their white saviour complex does not quite mix with "checking your privilege." Going every Friday to the "cool" and liberal protests of Nabi Saleh and spending most of the day chatting in Hebrew near the gas station under clouds of tear gas seems counter-productive.

Israeli anarchists believe that their very presence is charitable to the villages and benefits the protest, as if their white skins and Israeli IDs are crowning attributes in and of themselves. But even this is not really true. The village with the largest protest turnout in the West Bank is Kafr Qaddoum, and barely five Israeli activists attend its weekly protests. The claim that the presence of Israeli anarchists protects local Palestinian demonstrators is also preposterous as Palestinians are the ones who are always on the front lines, and the presence of Israeli activists does not make Israeli occupation forces any less violent. Thanks to their citizenship, Israeli anarchists are privileged over Palestinians by law, even when arrested or when injured which means that the

whole “co-resistance” mantra is a farce. At the end of the day, and after dodging few bullets, smelling tear-gas and skunk spray and taking some dramatic pictures, Israeli anarchists go back to the colony of Tel Aviv, at times through Jewish-only roads, they get to spend a good night out in a bar. Meanwhile, Palestinian villagers with whom they “co-resist” every Friday are always under the looming threat of night raids and retaliation by Israeli occupation soldiers.

Israeli anarchists need to understand that taking part in protests in the West Bank in their current form does not threaten the system. Truly rejecting their privileges would entail subjecting themselves to the life and death of the colonised. That is, it would entail actions on their part that would make the coloniser incapable of differentiating between them and Palestinian villagers with whom they “co-resist.”

Moreover, it would also entail dismantling their privilege within their own communities. Even before attending any protest in the West Bank, they should first recognise and work to dismantle the system of privilege where they live; strive to make change in their own communities; fight the long and invisible battles that do not get filmed on YouTube; and get rid of their White Man’s Burden. Palestinians are better off without it. Until then, they will remain part and parcel of the system that oppresses, colonises and suffocates Palestinians. They will remain so because their lives as they live them continue to depend on that very system.

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