

The Place of Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution

A Review Essay

Jason Schultz

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Arif Dirlik. *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. 326p.

Introduction

The place of anarchism in the foundation and development of the many revolutions in 20th century China is largely unknown or forgotten in China and the world over. Philosophers and organizers of numerous groups under the umbrella of anarchism helped lay the cornerstones for political, social, economic, and cultural struggles in China. Their work culminated in the capture of state power in 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). From the first decade of the 20th century to the early 1930s, anarchist ideas had much currency among those individuals seeking to construct a modern Chinese nation free from the influence of the flags of the rising sun, Union Jack, Stars and Stripes, and the modern Chinese state.

It also sought freedom from the grip of Confucian ideologies justifying monarchy, patriarchy and rule of the family over the individual. The ideologies and organizational forms building a new society under the banner of anarchism varied greatly. This proved very important in its relationship to the bourgeoisie parliamentary nationalism of the Kuomintang (KMT) and the fledgling Chinese Communist Party. To understand the philosophical and organizational strengths and weaknesses of the many flavors of anarchism in China during this time takes much research and study. Scholar and author Arif Dirlik has contributed to this important task with his thoroughly researched book *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*. This proved very important in its relationship to the bourgeoisie parliamentary nationalism of the Kuomintang (KMT) and the fledgling Chinese Communist Party. To understand the philosophical and organizational strengths and weaknesses of the many flavors of anarchism in China during this time takes much research and study. Scholar and author Arif Dirlik has contributed to this important task with his thoroughly researched book *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*.

The important research and writing that Dirlik presents help us understand the direction that revolutionary struggles in 20th century China took. Dirlik, a scholar who has written extensively on Marxism and anarchism in China, approaches the subject matter of the influence and place of anarchism in the Chinese revolution with an attitude of critical support. Dirlik believes Chinese revolutionaries espousing anarchist and Marxist-Leninist ideas had much to learn from each other, suggesting that the split between the two by 1923 was a missed opportunity to bring the best of each ideology together to create a new Chinese society. However, there were barriers to such a convergence. These included divergent views on the place of the state, the role of the vanguard organization, and tactics towards enacting social, economic, cultural, and political change between the anarchists and the communists. These differences created gulfs too wide to bridge. Dirlik also mentions that a major theme of his book (and this article for that matter) is not reclaiming statist versions of Mao, the Communist Party, or the Chinese Revolution for anarchism—to which, making an informed guess, anarchists would be the first to object. Dirlik's work successfully allows one to better understand the course the revolution took in China through Communism when viewed as part of a broader revolutionary movement, where anarchist ideas were central historically. Anarchism in China introduced dissonant elements into the Bolshevik conception of revolution. Anarchism was not the only heroic or legitimate expression of democratic, revolutionary philosophy and action in early 20th century China. However it was

one of the first, introducing a whole generation of future CCP leaders, including Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Zhou Enlai among others to its ideas of remaking society through revolutionary means. These ideas, from popular committees, communes, popular education, the idea of a “new culture” remaking individuals through self sacrifice, a breaking down of mental and manual labor, and a return to and celebration of rural life and agriculture as “going to the people” were all ideas first discussed and practiced by Chinese anarchists. It was only later that these ideas were incorporated into the Chinese Communist state after 1949 as Mao Zedong Thought. Coming to terms with this history helps explain the particularities of Chinese Communism both in the past and the present. It helps explain the “power from below” aspects of Chinese Communism, particularly its ability to co-opt energetic mass movements from the working classes and peasantry. Everyday Chinese folks struggling for democratic change from below can benefit today from examining how anarchist ideas were manipulated to shore up the authoritarian rule of the Communist state.

Anarchism Develops in China

The origins and growth of anarchism in China were part of broader trends in the development of anarchism worldwide during the first two decades of the 20th century. Anarchism in this time was making strides internationally, and these developments influenced Chinese social movements through literature and reports by Chinese in the diaspora, most importantly from individuals in Japan and France. China was also receptive to anarchist ideas from prominent Russian and American anarchists including Peter Kropotkin, Mikhail Bakunin, Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, and Varlaam Cherkozov among others. The influence of Marx was much weaker, only gaining strength after the founding of the CCP in 1921. This meant for many young Chinese radicals their initial point of reference towards revolutionary social change was not through Marx, but through anarchists like Kropotkin. However this did not mean that all young Chinese radicals were staunchly against the state. As it still functions today, anarchism can be viewed as a clearinghouse of broadly leftist anti-authoritarian philosophies and circles. Anarchism has many flavors from radical individualism, to cultural and literary pursuits challenging the “mainstream,” to syndicalist trade unionism, to revolutionary class struggle advocating popular committees and councils in opposition to the state. But anarchism has also always had its share of individuals and groups with social democratic philosophies, more eager to be progressive agents reforming the state from below than to be builders of self-governing societies. It is this clearinghouse notion and diversity of philosophy, tactics and organization (or lack thereof) that greeted young radicals in early 20th century China.

Chinese anarchists in Paris, grouped around the journal *New Century*, were pioneers of social democratic tendencies in the movement. In comparison to Chinese anarchists in Japan, who published journals with a bent towards primitivist naturalism (a call to return to pre-industrial society), anarchists in Paris proved more influential. The Paris group was started by Zhang Ji and Wu Zhihui. It later included future CCP party leaders Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai. This group approached anarchism as a driving cultural and educational force towards cosmopolitan modernization. This modernization mission would subsequently be expressed in the Kuomintang (KMT) and CCP state missions. The Paris group famously developed the educational initiative of “diligent work-study,” bringing young Chinese to France to learn the virtues of hard work, self-

sacrifice in attempting to break the divide between mental and manual labor. Their ideas and programs sought to make the modern Chinese individual through what was, by 1919, coined the “new culture movement.” However this movement was very much tied to the KMT as Zhang Ji and Wu Zhihui worked with these bourgeoisie nationalists as early as 1912. They were the cultural leftwing of Chinese nationalism, a Kautskyist interpretation of socialist ideas believing the path towards liberation entailed a slow evolution of the state and society, primarily through educational means. As Dirlik mentions, the diligent work-study program was actually supported and encouraged by the Kuomintang for it provided a safe outlet for aspiring anarchists in China to learn their ideas (away from China) and also supplied France with cheap foreign labor during the World War I. This was hardly anti-authoritarian. It is perhaps the legacy of these social democratic “anarchists” that had the most lasting effect on the CCP. Ideas of diligent work and making the “new man” through education and self-sacrifice were used by the CCP to justify its social and economic programs. For the Paris group, anarchism was a modernization project supporting the remaking of the Chinese nation in the mold of the cosmopolitan West. For them, democracy equated relative individual freedoms and civil society in support of the modern, progressive state.

Not all early anarchists can be viewed as the leftwing of the KMT. A handful of anarchists took the words of Kropotkin and Bakunin to heart, advocating class struggle and mutual aid societies in opposition to the state. Dirlik most notably mentions the circle around the philosopher Shifu. His group built federated communes in Guangzhou and later Shanghai. Shifu died prematurely in 1915, but his influence helped animate many democratic struggles from below that blossomed throughout in 1920s. Shifu, who tended towards a literal interpretation of anarchists like Kropotkin, was one of China’s first serious revolutionary anarchist philosophers and organizers. His circle conveyed their views and published translations of Western anarchists’ writings in the journal *Voice of the People* (*Min Sheng*). He also used the journal to polemicize against the social democracy of Sun Yat-Sen and Socialist Party leader Jiang Kanghu as statist social policies influenced by Marxist collectivism. In contrast, Shifu believed a true socialism was anarchist-communist, as theorized and practiced by Bakunin and Kropotkin. Shifu’s circle also had connections with anarchists aboard, receiving visits in Shanghai from Alexander Berkman and a number of Japanese anarchists. A thorough account of Shifu’s life and ideas can be found in Edward S. Krebs’ *Shifu, Soul of Chinese Anarchism*.

After Shifu’s death in 1915, individuals from his communes continued to publish *Voice of the People* and influence other serious Chinese anarchist thinkers. Most prominent among them was Ou Shengbai who, in the 1920s, upheld class struggle anarchism in polemics against founders of the CCP. It was Shifu’s circle that produced the most developed and historically grounded thoughts on socialism in early Republican China. They clearly staked positions as anarchists rooted in a stateless communism in opposition to state socialism that groups such as the KMT, Socialist Party, and the Paris circle practiced and supported. Shifu’s views were expanded and modified by his circle to help its members organize among workers, something he supported but never did during his lifetime. Shifu’s legacy would influence many young Chinese radicals, including Mao Zedong.

In discussing the varying organizing methods of the Paris group versus Shifu’s circle, Dirlik locates their conceptions of organization and power. He points out how “anarchist modernizers” were largely unable to conceptualize politics beyond that of culture and education. Dirlik suggests these anarchists tended towards a modern individualism, seeking to enact change through cultural and education initiatives from below that avoided “doing politics.” This phrase as used

by Dirlik is framed somewhat problematically, for those seeking change through educational and cultural realms were indeed doing politics in the sense that they were contending for ideological influence in a growing rebellious milieu. What Dirlik seems to suggest is anarchists were seeking not to directly work with the state or engage in party politics. The Paris group claimed to be “above politics.” Yet the founders of this circle supported KMT activities as early as 1912. What Dirlik suggests is the lack of “doing politics” meant a rejection of serious organizing and philosophical reflection on the ideas of power and coercion in making the new society. This was the case not only with the Paris group, but also among some individuals influenced by Shifu during and after his lifetime. The question of political power and organization became very evident in the 1920s during the philosophical and organizational struggles between anarchism and the Marxist-Leninist philosophies of the CCP.

Anarchists, Communists & Nationalists: Questions of Democracy, Organization & Power

The most crucial chapters of Dirlik’s book for our understanding of anarchist influence in revolutionary China and its eventual defeat at the hands of the nationalists and later the CCP are chapter six, “The Anarchist Alternative in Chinese Socialism, 1921–1927,” and chapter seven, “The Revolution That Never Was.” Dirlik lays out the struggle for power in 1920s China between the KMT, the emerging Communist Party, and assorted groups and philosophers advocating various forms of anarchism. All three forces would work with each other at times, publicly debate one another, and eventually wage violent struggle against each other. By the end of the decade, the nationalists purged the CCP and subordinated anarchists to consolidate their hold on state power. Dirlik portrays this initial defeat of revolutionary socialism as tragic in that anarchists and communists were unable to work together after their split in the early 1920s. However the real reason a revolutionary democratic China was not realized then was that after their split, the CCP and some anarchist forces opted for a popular front strategy seeking cooperation with the nationalists. It was a losing proposition from the start. Communists and anarchists were at best junior partners, easily played against one another and discarded when the nationalists saw them as too disruptive. The Chinese people would tragically learn this again during the Cultural Revolution some forty years later. They were taught the limits of democracy when granted from above by a seemingly progressive ruling class.

In portraying the public debates between anarchists and early CCP members in the early 1920s, most famously between CCP founder Chen Duxiu and class struggle anarchist Ou Shengbai, Dirlik focuses on questions of organization, coercion, and democracy. Polemics between Marxists and anarchists are still with us today throughout the world. Discussions among anarchists around ideas of organization and its relation to state power in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia were not unique to China. Anarchists with first-hand knowledge of events in Russia including Kropotkin, and especially Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and Varlaam Cherkezov were translated and published in China. Many radicals in China initially believed the Russian revolution was anarchist-led by the Bolsheviks. This was to change after reading on-the-ground reports. From these reports a number of anarchists, influenced heavily by Shifu, were able to deduct the state capitalist or collectivist nature of the Bolsheviks through their understanding of

Marx and his influence on Lenin. This shaded public debates between anarchists and communists who, initially in both China and the West, sought friendly working relations.

The public debate between Chen Duxiu and Ou Shengbai helped make obvious to young Chinese revolutionary socialists clear distinctions between Marxist-Leninist and anarchist ideologies. Chen, an official at Beijing University and major advocate of cultural anarchism during the “New Culture Movement,” believed anarchists in China too disorganized and unprepared to lead a revolution. Instead, he started to advocate Marxist-Leninist philosophies suggesting a vanguard of professional revolutionaries were needed to lead the country towards socialism through the means of proletarian dictatorship. While Chen generally agreed with some anarchist philosophies, he felt more discipline and centralized organized and a seizure of state power were needed towards an eventually goal of stateless socialism. He critiqued, correctly, the nature of some Chinese anarchists tending towards individualism and culture at the expense of collective class struggle and serious organization. While Shengbai agreed that class struggle was important and that ideas of organization should be addressed, he dismissed the notion that socialism must be obtained through stages including dictatorship of any sort. Even more strongly, anarchist Huang Lingshuang, who visited the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, aptly noted that the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat was a veil for rule of intellectuals and bureaucrats in the Communist Party. As Dirlik points out, the rise of Marxist-Leninist ideas in China was to suppress discussion of democracy from below, a crucial element in socialist ideology. This would haunt everyday Chinese folks, as both communists and anarchists would set up new methods of organization and opportunistic partnerships with bourgeoisie nationalists.

A contested space for influence among anarchists and Communists in the 1920s was the burgeoning labor movement. A number of syndicalist unions in major cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou grew in part because of anarchist influence. Many members of Shifu’s circle moved towards labor organizing after his death in 1915. Their success was uneven, organizing among transport workers and other laborers crucial to keeping port cities like Shanghai running. This helped produce a force in society demanding impudence from imperialists and also from the national capitalist classes. But like the Paris group, initially many anarchist-influenced labor unions claimed to be “above politics.” This spelled trouble because the CCP heavily competed for influence among these unions. They were very successful in organizing workers in Shanghai and helped form a commune there. CCP-backed unions followed the party into a popular front with the KMT that lasted from 1925 until April 1927 when many workers and party members were murdered and purged by the nationalists. In their bid for state power, the CCP and their followers were eliminated. Having learned little from this episode, a number of anarcho-syndicalist unions and original members of the Paris circle, including Wu Zhihui, backed a move to join the KMT. They saw an opportunity for patronage, with many mistakenly feeling the purge of Communists meant the KMT was more open to embracing anarchists. At best, the nationalists were friendly to the cultural aspects of popular education and individual freedoms that anarchists advocated. In reality, they were no more generous to anarchists than they were to the CCP, gutting the anarchists’ popular educational initiatives, like the Labor University in Beijing, to shells of themselves. They also shut down many anarchist journals. Whereas the nationalists rightly viewed the CCP as a threat to their hold on state power, the decentralized nature of the anarchist movement made them easy to subordinate and co-opt when necessary. The same can be said of the CCP and Mao Zedong Thought’s relationship to anarchism, where the roots of its distinct ideologies lie.

The most obvious influence of the anarchist legacy in Maoist China, and perhaps its greatest co-optation, was during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Mao encouraged youth to question elders, authority figures, and even party leaders. This led to much upheaval, acting as a cue for everyday folks to seize control of their lives from the stifling bureaucracy of the CCP. Dirlik notes the development of the Shengwulian federation in Hunan province. Taking their cue from Mao, they declared a people's commune of China, recalling the best of Chinese anarchism during the days of Shifu's circle in Shanghai. There were similar stories of groups and individuals striving towards direct democracy, taking the words of Mao to heart and pushing them toward an authentic anarchist re-organization of society through popular councils and committees. However this was not to be, for Mao's real intention was not to empower everyday folks at the local and national level, but rather to consolidate his power within the CCP against a new generation of Party bureaucrats challenging his leadership. He used populist rhetoric and ordinary people as shock troops to help purge elements in the party disagreeable to him. The Cultural Revolution as cover for an intra-Party battle was seen outside of China among anti-authoritarian leftists as early as 1967 as Cajo Brendel's "Theses on the Chinese Revolution" attests. This meant trouble for individuals and groups like the Shengwulian federation for when Mao and other party leaders saw their grip on society slipping away, they reigned in "the people" and ended the Cultural Revolution with brutal force. The CCP saw people's power from below as a real threat to their control of state power through a means of collectivist state capitalism. Like the anarchists and early CCP members who chose the strategy of a popular front with the KMT, everyday folks during the Cultural Revolution who took Mao's populist rhetoric at face value were dealt a harsh lesson in the limits of democracy when it is offered by progressive rulers from above.

Conclusion

Dirlik penned *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution* during the uprising of students and other individuals in Tiananmen Square in 1989. He suggested this revolt showed that people in China and the world over were looking outside of socialism for democracy, hence showing that the "socialist revolution" in China was not living up to its promise. Yet it was long before 1989 that many people in China knew the so-called leaders of revolution in China were not up to the task of democracy, be they workers in Shanghai in 1927 repressed by the Kuomintang, peasants in the 1950s starved to death under the state capitalist policies of the Mao Zedong and the CCP during the "Great Leap Forward", or the people's commune of the Shengwulian federation in Hunan province who took Mao's ideas of a Cultural Revolution to heart, only to be crushed by his army. The histories of anarchism and revolutionary democratic movements from below have a proud history in 20th century China. Yet they continue to be crushed today by a government that, during the time of Mao Zedong, cloaked ruthless state capitalist economic development and political centralization in language, culture, and social forms introduced to China through anarchism and other popular democratic philosophies.

Today that revolutionary veneer is largely lifted as the CCP pursues capitalist policies more akin to the United States and Western Europe. This is not to say revolutionary democratic struggles from below are not on the horizon. Everyday Chinese workers, farmers, and unemployed migrant folks are resisting in their own forms, as individuals or more importantly as groups or communities against economic and social repression. When these various, disparate struggles

will connect into a nation-wide movement only time will tell. As Asian, Asian American, and other activists and concerned citizens living here in the United States, it is important we tell the history of anarchist influence in the Chinese revolution. We must be willing to share its victories and defeats and its strengths and weaknesses in philosophy and organization. This will inform our own struggles for democratic and anti-racist communities be they in China, the United States, or elsewhere in the Asian world. Arif Dirlik's thorough study of Chinese anarchism makes an important contribution to these tasks.

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