

Book Review: “Anarchist Perspectives in Peace and War 1900–1918”

“Anarchist Perspectives in Peace and War 1900–1918” by A.W. Zurbrugg
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A.W. Zurbrugg has edited and worked on some very interesting contributions on historical anarchism: his selection of Bakunin’s texts and his book on anarchists’ impressions on the Russian Revolution, had both been reviewed in *anarkismo.net* before and I absolutely recommend them to anyone interested in anarchism. Now Zurbrugg comes back with a more ambitious project: an international historical recount of anarchism in the 20th century in four volumes, of which the first one was published under the title “*Anarchist Perspectives in Peace and War 1900–1918*”.

So what’s different in this attempt at an international history of anarchism from others? This is, above all, a history of the *anarchist movement* from the perspective of those who were at the centre of its development, their voices recovered through a careful and extensive research of conference proceedings, journal articles, memoirs, etc. He doesn’t uncouple theory from practice –as in the famous Daniel Guérin anthology, *Anarchism*, in which theory and practice are treated as separable entities. On the contrary, Zurbrugg is interested in ideas as long as they spring from organisational practices and debates. This historical recount of anarchism is not as concerned with utopianism as it is with the development of ideas through practical engagement. As such, his approach to anarchism is eminently materialist, not based on immaculate ideal definitions but on the experiential dimension of anarchism *as a movement*. His view is also less canonical than that contained in works such as Van der Walt and Schmidt’s *Black Flame*, for he accepts contradiction as inherent in the dynamic and evolving process of the definition of a movement *in motion*. In his own words,

‘anarchism’ was not the result of some a priori theory, although no doubt revolutionaries were certainly influenced by several past theories; rather, ‘anarchism’ evolved and was defined in practice by the choices women and men made to join this or that workplace movement, or protest, stressing certain choices and perspectives. It was not one immutable doctrine, it was a set of mixed and agitated conversations, encounters, debates, reflections and synthesis, coming together at one moment and evolving. Out of these conversations there emerged strands of federalist and decentralised socialism (p.6).

I can't think of a more useful –and at the same time, less canonical- definition of anarchism ever produced, which squarely places anarchism in a broader socialist tradition. Needless to say, his views of anarchism evolving as a 'synthesis' are not to be conflated with the idealist project of a 'synthesist anarchism' produced by Voline and his associates; while they referred to anarchism as deriving from distinctive ideal currents (individualism, communism and syndicalism), Zurbrugg refers to the synthesis of ideas emanating from practical engagement.

These ideas circulated mostly through publications. Anarchism had a flourishing press in the period covered by this book. Hundreds, if not thousands, of papers and pamphlets were produced in a multitude of languages all over the world. These papers, before the era of internet, were the means by which anarchists of various persuasions and continents stayed in touch with one another, made their ideas circulate, debated and took home practical ideas. But not only ideas circulated through the papers and through written propaganda; anarchists attempted to organise international networks and organised conference, such as the London conferences of 1896 and 1913 which are covered in this book, or the Amsterdam conference of 1907. On these occasions, anarchists from different persuasions and countries debated about some of the most pressing issues of the time, about the objectives and the methods of their movement, and on a variety of social, economic, and philosophical issues. Another source of circulation of ideas were migrants and refugees, who formed anarchist groups, circles and unions wherever they went, liaised with other anarchists in their countries of origin, and tried to keep an international –not only in outlook or spirit, but above all, in practice- movement to challenge an equally globalised unjust social system. Papers and their editors were persecuted and censored; conferences were often subject of close surveillance, banned and delegates prevented from reaching them; and migrants were extensively persecuted, deported, and subject to repressive 'alien acts'. Although repression took a heavy toll on the anarchist movement at the turn of the century, it still managed to fight back.

This first volume is concerned with a period (1900–1918) marked in Europe by the escalating militarisation, growing conflicts over boundaries and the scramble for the colonies, and the entrenchment of toxic nationalistic jingoism. But this spirit also reached across the Atlantic Ocean to the American continent, and one may say, through the colonial tentacles of the European powers to every single continent in the world. This is the backdrop against which the anarchist movement had to organise, struggle and respond to. They tried to do so to the best of their ability and they did so across the globe. However, the scope of the book is limited to mostly to urban movements in Europe, the USA and Latin America (mostly, but not exclusively, Argentina and Cuba). A truly global history of anarchism, in both towns and countryside, is beyond the capacity of any individual; and yet, in spite of this limitation, the method of following the circulation of ideas through the press, congress resolutions and manifestos, works exceedingly well. Instead of focusing on anecdotes or minute details about the anarchist movement in many countries, Zurbrugg follows the trends as they developed in the movement in response to global challenges. This in itself is a remarkable achievement.

Naturally, the rise of militarisation, colonialism, and jingoism, dominate much of the debates of these anarchists, together with other issues such as the unity of action of the socialist movement and the labour movement. The volume is thus organised in two parts. A much larger part called 'peace', that is, the period before the outbreak of the Great War of 1914 –a period which can be hardly described as of peace in any meaningful sense of the word, being the period when all the causes leading to the mass slaughter of the 1910s were being incubated. And a much shorter part

called 'war', in which the book deals with the perspectives and responses of anarchists in the face of the Great War, a fateful event to which they were proved to be ill-prepared and which seemingly took them by surprise to the point that the French anarchist paper *Les Temps Nouveaux* claimed, a week after war between France and Germany broke out, '*what we had refused to believe until the last moment is now an accomplished fact. War has been unleashed*' (p.158). It is not that they didn't see such a scenario coming: they fatally overestimated their own strength (with most unions claiming that they would call for a General Strike if war broke, a scenario which didn't materialise when war actually stormed Europe) and the internationalist feelings of the European working class. If they were slow to realize about the seriousness of the situation they were facing in the advent of the Great War, they showed far more prescience about the fact that this first war would necessarily lead to another deadlier conflagration. In the words of Malatesta, '*it is most probably that there will be no definite victory on either side. After a long war, an enormous loss of life and wealth, both sides being exhausted, some kind of peace will be patched up, leaving all questions open, thus preparing for a new war more murderous than the present*' (p.181).

While the anarchist and syndicalist movement took a decisively anti-war and internationalist perspective, the reformist labour movement and the social-democracy took a lukewarm approach to internationalism and refrained to condemn militarisation experienced in Europe way before the Great War broke. The French CGT, the most significant revolutionary union of the time together with the US IWW, were at the foremost of anti-militarist propaganda, and tried to call for coordination of action between the working classes of potential warring countries, facing the opposition of the German social-democratic labour movement who dismissed their attempts. In reality, this showed how the parliamentary left, as long as they saw themselves as having a stake in their national-State, became progressively identified with the elites' agenda. When war materialised, they just followed their leaders and respective governments and rolled the drums of war. However, the CGT was unable to react, since they didn't prepare for a scenario in which they, a French organisation, wouldn't have a significant German counterpart to oppose the war with and practice internationalist working class solidarity. This major flaw, together with overestimating their own forces and their capacity to call for a General Strike in the event of war, proved fatal, and the organisation backed from their rhetorical anti-war position to a mild justification of the French government claiming that theirs was a "defensive war". Pierre Monatte and other staunch revolutionary syndicalists reacted in disgust and distanced themselves from these positions, while anti-war activism was seriously repressed and persecuted.

Anarchist anti-militarism, although it found a common ground with the pacifist movement, differed with the latter in important respects. The former, didn't simply advocated 'peace' but they advocated revolution. Their goal was to turn the crisis caused by war into a generalised struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors. As such, the accusation of the veteran anarchists (headed by none other than Kropotkin) who signed the so-called "Manifesto of the Sixteen" in support of the supposedly 'progressive' France against 'autocratic' Germany, who claimed that '*talk of peace at this moment would be playing the game of the Bülow's German ministerial party and its allies*' (p.179) was completely misplaced. The real problem for the vast majority of anarchists who rejected taking sides on behalf of any State in the face of war, in my opinion, was that they were seriously ill-prepared to oppose in practice and to turn any war between States into a war between classes. In spite of their best intentions, the sincerity of their convictions, and the intensity of their agitation, the anarchists were too disorganised to be able to challenge effectively the course of events. Their attempts to form an international coordination, networks

or federations, came to nothing but the formation of corresponding bureaus, at best. While talking much about organisation in their propaganda (see for instance the writings of Malatesta), this talk rarely translated into solid organisational work in practice. As mentioned by Zurbrugg, there was no secure foundation for international federations '*in the absence of a regular pattern of regional, national and international anarchist congresses*' (p.113) which meant that the far better organised Social-Democracy prevailed in the international socialist and labour movement. Thus, they lacked the organisational resources and solid international bridges which could have effectively challenged the haunting spectre of war over Europe, and then to capitalise the deep discontent left in the wake of war, which translated into (mostly unsuccessful and aborted) mutinies, uprising, and revolutions.

This organisational failure of anarchism, led many anarchists to turn to revolutionary unionism or syndicalism from the 1890s, which the veteran anarchist James Guillaume saw as the continuation of the work of the anti-authoritarians in the *International Workingmen's Association*. The relationship of anarchists with the revolutionary unions and with the labour movement more generally, was another point of contention within the broad anarchist movement: while the syndicalist sector claimed that the unions were sufficient as revolutionary tools, others –with Malatesta being probably the most visible of the critics- claimed that anarchists should also be organised in political organisations as anarchists, and that they should avoid 'politicising' the unions and work in mainstream and all unions bringing their programme. In 1907, in the Amsterdam conference, this debate was the most important discussion in the agenda. However, the debate was misleading. The real question was not the nature of the unions, or what should anarchists do in relation to unions in abstract; the real point was to understand the unions in context, in relation to the prevalent fighting mood of the working class in a particular region or country, and the organisational resources available to anarchists to offer other alternatives. Without consolidated anarchist organisations, to turn away from revolutionary unions and to devote all efforts and energies to working in mainstream unions would have deprived anarchists of any effective influence in the current events at the time. Irrespective of one's opinions in the union/anarchist debate, the incontrovertible truth is that, if anarchism had any historical significance at the turn of the 20th century was mostly because of their work in militant labour organisations. As put forward by Zurbrugg, in this debate, '*Malatesta missed the spot: the USI (ie. Italian revolutionary union) had evolved out of real frustration and the failure of the CGL (ie. Italian reformist union) to support action, and those who joined the USI had chosen something beyond the CGL*' (p.117). Theoretical preferences for this or that type of union, in other words, shouldn't take precedence over the general mood of the working class or a sound understanding of developments on the ground. Moreover, any serious criticism of the revolutionary unionist strategy should have gone hand in hand with the development of something else being offered alternatively by the 'pure anarchists', so to speak.

Alas, it is this alternative which was not properly worked about. The tragic lack of solid anarchist organisations, no doubt, didn't help anarchists make a far bigger impact to prevent the bloodshed of the Great War and to turn this event into a full-scale revolutionary offensive. But it also could be detrimental at a more local level, as Malatesta himself acknowledged: '*It's good, when our propaganda obstructs the people sending to parliament socialists or republicans (...), if we have the capacity, with those we have wrenched away from electoral fetishism, to facilitate them becoming active and conscious fighters for true and complete liberation. If not, we would, and will, serve the interests of conservatives and the monarchy*' (p.28). Anarchist tactics, without an

anarchist strategy and organisational capacity, could be easily capitalised by precisely some of their worst enemies. This is an extremely important lesson which should be carefully considered by committed anarchists today, and which Malatesta didn't fully comprehend. In another article, he recommends that anarchists '*should be in the front rank when it came to a fight, but when it came to negotiations with the bosses or authorities they should not take the lead*' (p.118). This attitude is not only self-defeatist but dangerous: so what if the negotiators call for strengthening discrimination against migrant workers or against women? Malatesta put forward these ideas at a time when unions in many countries, like the US, called for restrictions to Asian workers in particular, or at a time when, even in the French CGT, it was a prevalent idea that women should stay out of the workforce because they exercised negative pressure over salaries. As such, to claim that anarchists should not take a lead in negotiations could lead to disaster, particularly if anarchists had been at the forefront of struggle. The real question, again, was what sort of leading role should anarchists adopt and how those roles derived from clear organisational structures and mechanisms which gave full control to the rank and file?

However, if the anarchist thought during this period seems inadequate to address some crucial organisational issues, it was far-sighted on other subjects. One remarkable aspect which is clear in Zurbrugg's work is how anarchist prefigured many of the current battles across the globe over a century ago: struggles for women's self-determination at a time when discussion on abortion or contraception was considered obscene and could lead to heavy fines or terms in prison even. This was not only a debate taking place in the USA or in Europe; important papers such as *La Voz de la Mujer* in Argentina proved the debate was not one confined to the so-called advanced capitalist countries. Struggles even for participatory budgets could be traced back to anarchist discussions: in 1896, an international congress of anarchists and syndicalists, meeting in parallel to the conference of the Second International in London, proposed that while the State was not abolished, '*communal mass meetings should meet and vote on budgets, war credits and taxation*' (p.18). This idea was part and parcel of the syndicalist emphasis in disputing the State on the economic field, way before the Brazilian PT came with these ideas in Porto Alegre in the late 1980s. The anti-militarism of the anarchists and their transformational ethos linked to anti-militaristic campaigns, challenging colonialism, imperialism, the militarisation of society, and the rise of domestic repression which accompanies war, also prefigured some of the radical anti-war movements in the world from Vietnam, to Iraq. Finally, unlike the entrenched racism and chauvinism of many social-democratic movements and parties, which favoured racially segregated unions in places such as South Africa or Australia, or which lent credence to the 'civilising mission' of European powers, anarchists and revolutionary unionists tended to have a radical commitment to anti-colonialism and racial equality which was well ahead of its time. Of course, there were exceptions to the rule and it is possible to find casual racism in the anarchist press at the time, or lack of sympathy with the plight of colonised peoples on occasion. Sometimes, migrant communities failed to reach native populations and were ghettoised –but this was equally true for many Spaniards in Cuba, or for Italians in Egypt, as it was for the French in the UK. By and large, anarchists were uncompromising enemies of colonialism, they rejected the civilisation/savage dichotomy which underpinned the Age of Empire, and they generally advocated working class unity regardless of creed and race –which was truly revolutionary at the time. In the highly segregated US society, the IWW played a very inspiring role in this respect.

One flaw of the book is that it lacks a conclusion chapter. The immense wealth of reflections and topics touched upon throughout the book, as well as the critical issues here raised, required

a conclusion to summarise and synthesise some key questions for the reader. To be sure, this was merely the first chapter of an ambitious project consisting of four volumes and I imagine that the author is saving the concluding remarks for the last volume. However, I would suggest that in the next two volumes, the author includes a concluding chapter. The ending is abrupt and leaves the reader with the impression that something was missing in order to wrap up an otherwise brilliant contribution to anarchist studies.

Altogether, this first volume is a prime example of historical work which is not backward-looking, but forward-looking, bringing history back to life in order to feed contemporary agitated conversations, encounters and debates. I am looking forward to the next three volumes of *Anarchist Perspectives*: the second volume '*Syndicalism, Revolution and Fascism 1917–1930*', the third volume '*Revolution in Spain 1931–1939*', and the fourth volume which will deal with anarchists perspectives after the Second World War. Judging by this first volume, they will all have much to say which is significant and of relevance for socialists and revolutionaries today.

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