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Principled Bakuninism

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When looking for new Latin American Anarchist groups, I happened to find a document I think is of importance. “*El Anarquismo Revolucionario: origen, evolucion y vigencia...*” was written by a Mexican anarchist group called Organizacion Popular Anarquista Revolucionaria (OPAR)¹. They subscribe to “Principled Bakuninism” (*Bakuninismo Principista*) The following is a brief examination of this tendency. (My Spanish is not the best, my apologies to OPAR if I am misrepresenting them in some way.)

Bakunin developed revolutionary anarchism from the proto-anarchism of Proudhon. Key elements of Bakunin’s anarchism were the need to implant oneself in the popular movements and the organization of the revolutionary minority. This latter entailed the formation of a tight, well organized, international revolutionary organization. The goal of the revolution was to abolish capitalism and the state and introduce what we today call Popular Power. The goal of the revolutionary organization was to encourage the mass movements in that direction. Bakunin’s “vanguard” was not authoritarian. It did not boss the worker

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¹ opar.ideosferas.org/

organizations. Nor was the vanguard to rule once the revolution was made. It was simply composed of the most advanced people and lead by example and persuasion, not coercion.

After Bakunin's death, his followers, Cafiero, Kropotkin and Malatesta tried to continue the revolutionary anarchist tendency. But in doing so, they ignored those two key aspects of Bakunin's revolutionary praxis — involvement with the masses and the revolutionary organization. Instead, they proposed the formation of loose affinity groups. They also sought to encourage attacks against the authorities; the ill-fated tactic known as "propaganda of the deed." Their "revisionism" served only to distance revolutionary anarchism from the peasants and workers, marked anarchists as terrorists and chaotic people (to this very day) and bury the concept of the revolutionary organization. These errors allowed the Social Democrats to go unchallenged and to build powerful organizations that would then deflect the population away from revolution.

It was soon evident that propaganda of the deed was a disaster and within less than a decade, most anarchists had re-entered the labour movement. This new movement was anarcho-syndicalism and gave rise to many working class militants. While anarchist ideas now had a mass appeal, one thing was missing. This was the concept of the revolutionary organization. The lack of this revolutionary minority would prove fatal in 1936 when the CNT-AIT leaders betrayed the Spanish Revolution by joining the government rather than destroying it and instituting Popular Power.

By the time of the Great War, anarchism was split three ways. One group favoured an educational and cultural approach, the second were the syndicalists and the third were the synthesists. This latter group sought to unite all anarchist tendencies in one umbrella group. None of these tendencies followed Bakunin's concept of revolutionary organization.

There were a number of groups and individuals, who, in some manner, did follow in Bakunin's footsteps. These included the

anarchist thought. It has certainly made me re-evaluate both the history of anarchism and the organization question.

Magon Brothers, the Mahknovichina, (and the “Platform”) the Friends of Durruti, the FAU (Uruguayan anarchists) and George Fontenis. Contemporary groups are criticized. The present AIT and the groups it influences like Venezuela’s “El Libertario”, are condemned as ultra sectarians and a “rightist revision” of anarchism. Surprisingly enough, they don’t care much for the Neo-platformist or “Especifist” tendencies either, which are denounced for “eclecticism”.

From here on, I will attempt to give my evaluation of OPAR’s analysis.

The Propaganda of the Deed period has always seemed bizarre to me, a kind of death wish or momentary madness. No contemporary anarchist that I know of supports the tactic, for then or for now, yet there is not a great deal of explanation as to why it happened. (A lot of embarrassed silence though!) What explanations are available relate the tactic to the crushing of the Commune and the resulting Europe-wide repression. But this is only a partial explanation.

Bakunin’s “vanguardism” along with that of the Magon Brothers, has been seen by many, if not most, anarchists as an aberration — an “unanarchist” aspect of these otherwise great anarchists. (Sort of like the contradiction of Proudhon’s anarchism and his antisemitism.) But what if the concept of revolutionary organization isn’t in contradiction with anarchism, but a key missing aspect of it?

We all know that Marx’s followers tossed core elements of his theories aside and replaced them with a vulgarized, truncated version that became known as “Orthodox Marxism.” We also know that Marx’s thought suffered at the hands of his followers, not so much out of viciousness on their part, but out of ignorance. Could it be that anarchism suffered a similar fate?

The vast majority of social anarchists today are in favour of involvement in the mass organizations, or their creation where they don’t already exist. But once the populace is in motion, the syn-

dicalist unions, worker and neighborhood councils formed, then what? History has shown us in graphic and bloody detail how the mass organizations can bring us to revolution, but then stop and go no further. From the experience of history, it would seem that a revolutionary minority is needed to encourage that final push, leading to the destruction of the state, the institution of Popular Power and the suppression of reaction.

I do not believe that the “correct program” is a panacea. You can have the best program ever devised, but if conditions are not right, you will remain a minority on the sidelines. But when conditions are right, when the population is in revolt and the question of power is about to be broached, this program and the militants to follow it, can make a crucial difference between success and failure.

Where I part company with the OPAR comrades, is the manner in which they present their case, and their attitude toward other anarchists, rather than the overall analysis itself. I doubt whether Kropotkin or Malatesta deliberately and maliciously chose to revise Bakunin’s anarchism. They were seized by the error of ultra-leftism, something not unknown among young militants. They made a mistake, albeit a very serious one. Having made mistakes all my life, and being totally sincere each time I do, and noticing that all my comrades have done the same and are just as sincere, I cannot come down too hard on Kropotkin and Malatesta. Furthermore, after they came to their senses they did as much as anyone ever has to spread the message of anarchism. (a truncated version of anarchism from a Bakuninist perspective.)

While I agree that some AIT groups, or the friends thereof, are sectarian, I think OPAR is a bit guilty of it too. It is a poor tactic to insult the people you are trying to win over. Calling those you disagree with “revisionists”, “petty bourgeois”, declaring that so and so really isn’t an anarchist, only serve to create hostility, diverting people from the real issues at hand. The correct tactic when trying to bring new ideas to a group or to engage in constructive criticism, is to first bring people together on what they

have in common. How would I do it? “All social anarchists want to abolish the state and capitalism, all believe in direct action, direct democracy, mutual aid, federalism. But we are not doing our best to enact that program, and the reason why, is that we are missing something very important. What is missing is Bakunin’s concept of revolutionary organization...”

Nor is the diversity of anarchism such a bad thing. Today’s working population is very diverse in its makeup and what appeals to one sector might not to another. Our diversity can, and sometimes does, mirror that complexity. The important aspect of this is that all anarchists work together on common projects. Not everyone will want to belong to the revolutionary organization and may even be opposed to the idea of having one, but if they are willing to work together in the mass organizations or common fronts, what is the problem?

Neo-Platformist “eclecticism”? Not sure what that means. What I do know is lack of sectarianism and the willingness to work with others is what has made Neo-platformism appealing to me. The old Platformism was sectarian and did much damage to the general anarchist movement, thus making Synthesist Anarchism seem like the voice of reason. The new Platformism, by working with others and not condemning them for doctrinal crimes, has taken what is best about Synthesism — the common ground approach — but adding what is lacking — a separate coherent revolutionary organization. Just after studying the OPAR document I came across an article by the Federazioni dei Comunisti Anarchici — undoubtedly one of those “eclecticists” — entitled “The Communist Origins of Anarchism.”² It closely parallels what OPAR has written about the fate of post-Bakunin anarchism. What then are the differences between the new platformists and the Principled Bakuninists?

In summing up, while the OPAR document has a somewhat flawed presentation, it nevertheless is a valuable contribution to

² www.fdca.it