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Personal statement on the Michael Schmidt affair

Lucien van der Walt

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Schmidt affair. It is important to examine what happened, to reflect on what it reveals, to seek resolution, and to use the situation to help develop libertarian ethics and justice.⁴

In solidarity,
Lucien van der Walt, Makana, South Africa,

11 February 2016

Many people have asked me to comment on the Schmidt affair, and to those who wrote to me, I said I would comment after all the articles were out, and after all Michael Schmidt's replies were out. Those following the affair will know it centres on the claim that Schmidt was, from at least 2002, some sort of racist right-winger or fascist working inside the anarchist movement – a charge Schmidt has denied.

Now that what looks to be the final instalment in the series of seven articles by Alexander Reid-Ross and Joshua Stephens has appeared (24 December 2015), and that it seems Schmidt is not issuing a third reply to them (he did two in 2015), I have tried to put pen to paper to comment.

And I have found it very difficult.

The reasons are quite simple. I have mixed feelings, I am unsure what to think. I want to reach a final position, and have tried to do my best to hear all sides of the story, not just those that fit what I initially thought. My views have shifted over time, they shift daily.

I have problems with the actions and arguments of Reid-Ross and Stephens, but I also have problems with the actions and arguments of Schmidt.

I find it difficult to reconcile the Michael Schmidt I saw, with the statements he has admitted to posting online under fake personas. These include comments on boards, as well as what appears to be a longer manifesto, called the "Strandwolf's Creed."

I find those online statements to be deeply abhorrent, shocking – no matter what reason is given to explain them, in their own right they are just awful. I completely distance myself from those statements. They embody racist and fascist positions that I find appalling, and that I have opposed consistently, for decades, to the best of my abilities – and let me stress here that, despite my ethnic background, I reject Afrikaner nation-

⁴ anarkismo.net

alism, in all its forms, as an essentially reactionary current. The “Strandwolf’s Creed,” posted under one of Schmidt’s online fake personas, had clearly racist and fascist content, I reject it entirely. I also believe some of the online posts by these personas were inflammatory and irresponsible, going beyond, in my view, the ethics of journalism and social research.

I also completely reject a document that Schmidt authored in his own capacity, and circulated in 2008 in the South African anarchist political group, Zabalaza/ ZACF, called “Politico-Cultural Dynamics ...” I was not part of that organisation at the time. I was not party to the discussions in Zabalaza over it. When I checked later, Zabalaza’s records showed that the organisation rejected the text, and that Schmidt recanted its worst formulations as “bordering on racism,” in 2008. Many years later, when I was informed of this text for the first time, by someone else, I asked Schmidt about it: he stated that he wrote it when disillusioned and burned-out, and that he distanced himself from it. But no matter what his intentions and situation may have been when he wrote it, I think it’s an irredeemable and unacceptable text.

Schmidt’s core defense of the right-wing online statements and the “Creed” that he posted under false personas has been that the statements emphatically did not reflect his real views, but were as fake as the personas he created online. So he says that his online statements (through these personas) were certainly and definitely racist and fascist – but insists that they are inventions, used cynically as part of an undercover investigation into the radical white right, first as a journalist, and then for research towards a book called “Global Fire.” His real views, he insists, are those expressed in a long history of progressive and left-radical political work, and a social life, that locates him firmly in the camp of the country’s black working class.

Reid-Ross and Stephens argue, on the other hand, that Schmidt’s online statements through his various online right-wing personas are far too consistent with elements of

I reiterate my position: I reject racist and right-wing positions as abhorrent and unacceptable, and as contradicting the anti-colonial, anti-fascist, anti-imperialist and anti-racist politics and history of anarchism and syndicalism. My political commitment remains to the complete national liberation of the black working class in South Africa, to an anti-racist, internationalist, egalitarian, bottom-up left politics, to a radical change in society based on a massive redistribution of wealth and power,

These are the reasons I have severed ties with Schmidt.

I add that, as a Council member of the IATH / ITHA, I am signatory to the IATH/ ITHA statement of 23 March 2017.³ This announced and explained our decision, made well before Schmidt’s letter, to escalate Schmidt’s suspension from IATH/ ITHA to complete removal. It outlines our repudiation of Schmidt’s actions, reservations about his letter, and our decision to reject his request to be allowed to resign of his own accord.

Schmidt’s actions have, I know, cast a shadow over the book “Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism.” “Black Flame” was written over ten years ago; it went to the publishers at the start of 2006. Schmidt played a very limited role in the book, a point that he has repeatedly admitted. I was primary author, and poured into it my heart and soul, many years of work and debate. It is not a perfect work, of course. What is? Many people have asked me to keep the book in print, but for some, the Schmidt affair unfairly taints the reputation of the book. That is a sad reality. The fact is that what Schmidt acted in ways fundamentally at odds with the emancipatory positions, history and tradition championed in “Black Flame.”

Finally, while I have made up my own mind, I still support the Anarkismo network’s call for a commission into the

³ ithanarquista.wordpress.com

with his actions, including his admitted role in repeatedly frustrating earlier investigations into his actions by myself and others. I also laid out my emotional turmoil over the affair, the gulf between the Schmidt I knew and trusted, a man active in left and black working class circles, and another Schmidt, increasingly exposed.

In early 2017, Schmidt sent a confession and apology to the Institute for Anarchist Theory and History (IATH) / Instituto de Teoria e História Anarquista (ITHA), a Global South-based research project. IATH / ITHA has made the letter available on request, and a copy can be found here.² The IATH / ITHA has also urged Schmidt to publish the letter.

In this letter, Schmidt admits for the first time that he drifted towards the radical right. He claims this took place in a period of deep personal crisis, and states that he has a history of mental illness and severe emotional and personal problems. He says he became secretly influenced by the right and its racist arguments, while maintaining sincere public positions on the left. He denies any project of infiltrating the anarchists, insisting that his views and actions became increasingly incoherent. He again affirms that he deliberately concealed this situation from a wide range of people and organisations. Lastly, he apologises for his actions, and the harm he caused, claiming to have repudiated the right, citing his ongoing current work in anti-racist and human rights causes.

In describing the letter, I certainly do not endorse it or promote it. There are important gaps in the confession, issues and problems elided. The apology is inadequate, coming after 18 months of denying any guilt. It also comes after years of deception and reprehensible behaviour. I do not accept or condone what Schmidt has done. His desire to make amends is noted, but must be weighed against what has happened.

² pastebin.com

his public persona and writings, and far too offensive, to be explained away as simply part of a research project. They also argue against the undercover-journalism defense on the grounds that he has, they insist, produced little in the way of research outputs as a result.

Versions of these claims and counter-claims have been in circulation for some time, at least back into 2011, in some circles. But never as detailed and extensive as now: it is only with Reid-Ross and Stephens' articles, and the two Schmidt replies, that a fuller picture has started to emerge.

Where does the truth of the matter lie? Does it lie with one or other of the two main narratives that have been put forward? Does it fit uneasily with both?

Right now, I find it difficult to reach definite conclusions.

I was deeply disappointed to read, in Schmidt's two replies to his accusers, his frank admission that he had not only concealed his claimed undercover journalism from Zabalaza and others for years – and it was even worse, to learn, from those replies, that he had continued to conceal the full scope of his online activities and personas even when he was confronted by Zabalaza and others, including me, from 2011.

I do think that there are important elements of the claims by Reid-Ross and Stephens that have not been clearly addressed by Schmidt's replies. These are some examples. One is the claim Schmidt has a runic tattoo on one arm, of a symbol associated with the white radical right, and that he got this to signify a radical right position. Another is the allegation that he voted for the Afrikaner nationalist Freedom Front Plus in South Africa's 2009 general elections. A third is the argument that some of his journalistic articles in the mainstream press show sympathies with the white radical right.

On the other hand, there are important elements of Schmidt's replies that have not been adequately addressed by Reid-Ross and Stephens, in their responses. These are some examples. One is the claim Reid-Ross and Stephens skip over

Schmidt's tattoos that are clearly anarchist, like an Anarchist Black Cross tattoo, ignoring evidence that does not neatly fit. Another is the allegation that at least one of the major statements they attribute to Schmidt does not actually appear in the text they cite. A third is the argument that, even now, they have not engaged with the bulk of what Schmidt has written, skipping three of five books, various anarchist pamphlets, and most of the many hundreds of articles he's written, anarchist as well as journalistic. A fourth claim is that they have acted at odds with journalistic ethics, interviewing with Schmidt under false pretenses, not giving him a right-of-reply before publication, displaying overt personal hostility, and making dubious claims to, for instance, treat the fact Schmidt had a black wife and friends as irrelevant, even damning.

Now, let me be clear. I hope that there are simple explanations, from both sides, for all these concerns. I really hope so. I'd like to see all these issues addressed, by both sides. I am not taking sides, because I am not sure what to think.

Well, that's where I am today, unsure, with reservations about both Schmidt and Reid-Ross and Stephens, in turmoil, not sure how to proceed and hoping for the issues to be resolved.

I have tried to think through the issues, vacillated, changed my mind. Sometimes I have acted emotionally and foolishly – for which I apologize sincerely and unreservedly.

In early December 2015, for example, I posted a several times online, under a once-well-known name I used to use, Red.Black.Writings. I had resolved not to post or debate online at all, but I got emotional. This was soon after Schmidt posted his second reply. In these posts I argued that Schmidt's reply was pretty strong, and that his critics were missing some of its key claims, being a bit selective when using evidence (for example, skipping over Schmidt's anarchist tattoos, high-lighting instead a runic tattoo), not always considering other explanations, and so on.

through how to deal with matters like the Schmidt affair in a more constructive, comradely and movement-building manner.

And maybe, in the process, people can consider just what they want to achieve in affairs like this.

There will probably never be a consensus on this case, and people will need to decide how they deal with difference here, and how to move beyond what has become a very vitriolic debate, including insults, smears, and even hate-mail.

For me, for now, my feelings are mixed, my mind not made up, my emotions in turmoil, and my path unclear. I know some people want me to make a clearer statement, but this is where I am right now. Unsure.

So, for now, I wait. I wait for the commission, I discuss with comrades, colleagues and friends.

And I will take a final position after the commission.

Yours sincerely,

Lucien van der Walt, Makana, South Africa, 11 February 2016

10 April 2017

On 11 February 2016, I issued an initial personal statement on the Michael Schmidt affair.¹ I completely rejected the irredeemable racist and right-wing statements attributed to Schmidt, which were mainly posted under false names online. They represent positions I have consistently opposed, for decades, to the best of my abilities. I noted problems with his explanation, centred on the claim that his posts and false personas were solely means for infiltrating the radical right for undercover research. I raised serious ethical problems

¹ ithanarquista.wordpress.com

ing. I was soon approached by a member of Zabalaza about the matter, and I replied that Zabalaza needed to deal with the issue firmly, and confront Schmidt.

Zabalaza did confront Schmidt in 2011 – as did I, in my own capacity – and he was confronted about these issues several times subsequently. His reply was always roughly the same as that he still maintains, that the fake personas were for undercover research purposes, and emphatically did not represent his real views. Remember also that he had rejected “Politico-Cultural Dynamics ...” in 2008, so this matter was not brought into the discussion.

For my part, I took Schmidt’s explanation at face value, based on the Schmidt I knew, and the record of action, that I saw. And based, I must admit, on the fact I respected, trusted and liked him.

Maybe I am naïve, but I have been guided by a belief in human decency, and a trust in people, based on what I have experienced directly. When I express reservations about the case against Schmidt, it does not come from a stubborn effort to see only one side of the story, or to defend anything and everything that Schmidt may have ever done. It does not come from an effort to cover up. It certainly does not come from any sympathy for noxious views or from any hidden agenda.

Yet I warned Schmidt, on these occasions, that if there was substance to the claims that he had been affiliated to the radical white right he would face ostracism and lose friends, that people who did not like him would also actively try to ruin him.

And if now, after all, there is indeed substance to the claims, I and many others will feel deeply betrayed by him, and how he turned his back on his anarchist writings and militancy.

Where to now?

I understand that there is a non-partisan anarchist and syndicalist commission being called to look into the Schmidt affair.

Maybe that can lead to some resolution. Maybe the commission can help anarchism and syndicalism globally think

I apologise sincerely and unreservedly for engaging the issues under the Red.Black.Writings identity without clearly identifying it as mine. I should have done so, from the start. I am sorry if it was misleading. I acted emotionally, and without care. I am truly sorry. I didn’t create the Red.Black.Writings identity to engage on the Schmidt issue (it has been around for years, and is fairly well-known as mine), and I was posting on a board where pretty much no-one uses their real names. But that does not excuse me.

There was one positive outcome of this unhappy experience: I found some of the replies to my points difficult to answer. I left the board because I needed to think these through. I haven’t posted there since. The fact is that I was forced to do some serious reflection by the exchanges. I was forced to recognise more problems in Schmidt’s arguments. While I continue to have reservations about the Reid-Ross and Stephens arguments, I have, let me state it again, reservations about Schmidt’s arguments.

I don’t particularly like the way many online debates about the Schmidt affair have been conducted, but that doesn’t mean I can’t recognize important points when they are made.

To understand the emotional side of the issues, and my conflicted views, let me say something on a personal level: I have known Michael Schmidt for a long time, since the mid-1990s; I was in radical groups with Schmidt from 1995 until about ten years ago, 2007; and I was in contact with him when he got divorced in 2007, and burned-out, ill and depressed from 2008.

Also around ten years ago, my main written collaboration with Schmidt took place. This was, of course, the book “Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism.” Although “Black Flame” appeared in print in 2009, it was largely written in 2005–2006, the proofs for correction arriving late 2007. I was the primary author.

It was an effort at a global, non-Eurocentric account of mainstream anarchist and syndicalist history and theory – one with

flaws, certainly, but one with many strengths too. The book went for peer-review, at my insistence, and no reviewer then, or critic later, made any allusion to right-wing themes in the book. Those who criticized the book tended to take issue with its stress on class-struggle, or its definition of anarchism.

Schmidt's lengthy (second) reply to Reid-Ross and Stephens reminded me of his track record as an activist-writer, and reflected the person I saw. I saw a long history of non-racial action, and dedication to a black working class-based anarchism, which I find difficult just to forget. The Schmidt I saw dedicated a great part of his life to anarchism and syndicalism, in his writings, militancy and daily life. This is the Schmidt that many people, in South Africa and worldwide saw, not just me, a man involved in unions, protests, agitation, and radical publishing.

And in this long period, Michael Schmidt never expressed to me the sorts of views that Reid-Ross and Stephens insist he has held since at least 2002. I never saw him politically active in ways that suggested a radical right-wing agenda. I never saw, in any draft of what became "Black Flame," or in the drafts that I saw of its successor "Global Fire" (which have been written by Schmidt), the sorts of views critics claim Schmidt has long held. Even when he was grappling, from 2007, with personal demons, job issues, divorce, and general disappointment, he did not express such views to me.

I also never saw the sort of manipulative, duplicitous and aggressive personality described by the Reid-Ross and Stephens' articles, or some of the anonymous sources they cited. And again, I am not alone in this.

In the long period I have known Schmidt, we have had many disagreements on many issues, including political ones, but the side of himself he showed to me was always that of a pretty standard class-struggle anarchist.

But I say "showed to me," very deliberately, because I knew his writing and research and militancy basically through his

public anarchist and anarchist-related writings and activities in the 1990s and 2000s.

Our interaction was around left-radical projects. Sometimes I worked with him as a co-author. Sometimes he asked for feedback on drafts, on the understanding that he bore final responsibility for their content. I can't say I followed his newspaper pieces articles very closely. And of course, he was his own man, and he did not run everything by me, as if I was his editor or commissar. Many of his articles I only saw after they were published – I can recall some I hotly rejected, including one on the late, unlamented Eugene Terre'blanche.

And I say "showed to me," deliberately, because obviously a person can have different sides, not all visible. While I can say the Schmidt I saw seemed the genuine article, I can't claim I saw every part of Schmidt, I can't claim that I saw everything he said or did. But if he had another political persona, it was not shown to me.

And I say "showed to me," deliberately, because the Reid-Ross and Stephens articles have drawn to my attention to a body of materials of which I was not previously aware, and made some criticisms about Schmidt's explanation for his on-line fake personas that do need to be addressed – as I have indicated earlier.

And I also say "showed to me," deliberately, because Schmidt did not inform me he was creating fake online personas, never shared with me the texts he posted through such personas, nor did he state to me and others in the 2000s that he was undertaking a claimed undercover-journalism / research on the radical white right. It's not just that I did not see all of Schmidt: this activity, at least, was specifically kept under wraps by Schmidt.

It was in early 2011 that Zabalaza was informed, by other sources, that Schmidt was operating false personas on radical white right sites and showing affinities to the radical right. Schmidt had left Zabalaza a year before. I was not in Zabalaza, so I do not know all the details or the exact dates of this inform-