

Anarchism or vanguardism?

A critique of the IRPGF and guerrilla ideology

nothingiseverlost

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Guerrilla ideology reduces all revolutionary questions to quantitative problems of military force. Nothing could be more disastrous.

– James Carr, Bad

Power does not come any more from the barrel of a gun than it comes from a ballot box. No revolution is peaceful, but its “military” dimension is never central. The question is not whether the proles finally decide to break into the armouries, but whether they unleash what they are: commodified beings who no longer can and no longer want to exist as commodities, and whose revolt explodes capitalist logic. Barricades and machine guns flow from this “weapon”. The greater the change in social life, the less guns will be needed, and the less casualties there will be. A communist revolution will never resemble a slaughter: not from any nonviolent principle, but because revolution subverts more (soldiers included) than it actually destroys.

To imagine a proletarian front facing off a bourgeois front is to conceive the proletariat in bourgeois terms, on the model of a political revolution or a war (seizing someone’s power, occupying their territory). In so doing, one reintroduces everything that the insurrectionary movement had overwhelmed: hierarchy, a respect for specialists, for knowledge that Knows, and for techniques to solve problems — in short for everything that plays down the role of the common man.

– Gilles Dauve, When Insurrections Die

“Revolutionary” acts are no longer appraised in terms of the situation in which they are embedded, the possibilities they open up or close. What happens instead is that a form is extracted from each one of them. A particular sabotage, occurring at a particular moment, for a particular reason, becomes simply a sabotage. And the sabotage quietly takes its place among certified revolutionary practices on a scale where throwing a Molotov cocktail ranks higher than throwing rocks, but lower than kneecapping, which itself is not worth as much as a bomb. The problem is that no form of action is revolutionary in itself: sabotage has also been practiced by reformists and by Nazis. A movement’s degree of “violence” is not indicative of its revolutionary determination.

– The Invisible Committee, To Our Friends

The whole gun thing, it just makes me really hot.

– Charlie Kelly, Gun Fever Too: Still Hot

Over the past few months, the International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), a new anarchist group fighting in Rojava, have published a fair few interviews and texts setting out their positions. On a purely defensive level, I certainly appreciate anyone fighting against ISIS in the name of international antifascist solidarity, but the IRPGF go way beyond this and repeatedly present themselves as the representatives of anarchism in the area, carrying out a project that will be “valuable to the entire anarchist community worldwide”. With that in mind, I think it’s legitimate for others in that “worldwide community” to raise a few questions about the IRPGF’s ideology, and how it relates to the cause they claim to be advancing.

Before considering the IRPGF’s presentation of their ideas, it’s worth taking a moment to consult a very different set of texts about anarchism and Syria, the recent translation of Omar Aziz’s text on “The Formation of Local Councils” and the accompanying documents setting out its context. While “The Formation of Local Councils” itself is a fairly practically-minded document, concerned much more with immediate problems than in drawing out wider theoretical lessons, the accompanying introductions do a brilliant job of setting out a genuinely subversive, revolutionary anarchist perspective. To quote a few of the most relevant sections:

“Although not a pacifist movement as we would usually understand the term, much of the grassroots Syrian revolution does not believe that armed struggle is what will bring about a better life. Rather, it is the dual approach described in this text: destroying the state while producing new forms of life. Neither of those actions particularly require violence, but they must be determined and willing to defend themselves.

The revolution of “local co-ordinating committees” as it has been sketched out in Syria, doesn’t require any terror to reach its goals, it hates and abhors murder. It doesn’t seek vengeance, but rather justice. It is not a desperate attempt by a minority trying to squeeze all of reality into the mould of its ideals. It is the product of the actions of hundreds of thousands or millions of individuals who resolved to take their lives in their own hands and to go as far as possible towards their dream of freedom and dignity. And it is precisely this experience of universal importance that the Holy Alliance of its enemies tries at all costs to bury under ruins and lies...” (from the translator’s introduction)

“It’s as though there exists a “daily division of work” between the tasks necessary to live in this world and revolutionary activities. This means that self-organizing in Syria is happening in two overlapping times: authority’s time, which continues to structure everyday activities, and revolutionary time, in which people take action to overthrow the regime. The danger doesn’t lie in the overlap of these two times, which is part of the nature of revolution, but rather in the separation between the progress of daily life and that of the revolution, for everyone involved. In the coming period, the movement will face two different threats : that human beings will get tired of the revolution and its impact on their material needs and family life, or that an increasing use of weapons will make the revolution a hostage of the gun.

Accordingly, the more self-organizing is able to spread as a force through the efforts of human beings to live in revolutionary time rather than in authority's, the more the revolution will have laid the groundwork for victory. Let's not forget that these past months were rich in all sorts of initiatives, especially ones focused on emergency medical care and legal support, and now we must urgently deepen these projects in order to take in broader spheres of life. Merging life and revolution is the key element for continuing the revolution and winning. This involves organizing for flexibility within social groupings by developing processes to co-ordinate revolution and everyday human life, which we will call here "local councils." (from Omar Aziz's October 2011 introduction)

It's worth bearing this perspective in mind when examining the IRPGF's ideology. The first clear indication of their guerrilla mindset came in their formation statement:

"Within movements for liberation an enormous chasm exists between those who deploy peaceful means to confront the enemy and those who defend both their communities and themselves through armed struggle. These dichotomous positions contain within them an inter-sectional network of social positions and identities that reveal their location, context and content. For the IRPGF, peaceful methods are unable to confront and destroy the state, capitalism and all forms of kyriarchal power. In fact, they do the reverse. They protect, embolden and strengthen the enemy, enhancing the forms of oppression against increasingly isolated individuals and divided societies. We believe that our liberation springs forth from the barrel of a gun."

Before examining the actual content of what they're saying here, it's worth taking a moment to note that 1) that is some utterly horrendous writing; I've read some bad jargon in my time, but "These dichotomous positions contain within them an inter-sectional network of social positions and identities" feels like it should be nominated for some kind of an award, and 2) the closing sentence is a not-very-subtle allusion to that well-known freedom-loving, state-hating anarchist, Chairman Mao Tse-Tung – a pretty standard reference point for vanguardist guerrilla groups, but a very odd one for anyone claiming to be an anarchist.

Of course, the choice of reference is less important than the actual content of their ideas, but those are pretty woeful as well – just like dogmatic pacifists, the IRPGF don't deal with violence as something that comes out of specific situations, but they set up an absolute binary between "peaceful protest" and "armed struggle". The "enormous chasm" they refer to appears to swallow up the huge amount of activities that don't fit neatly within either category, including most of the sabotage, blockading, vandalism, rioting and other methods that have been used by movements that don't adhere to rigid nonviolence but don't take up the specialised format of armed struggle either. From Paris 1968 to Brixton 1981 to Ferguson 2014, it doesn't take much effort to think up examples of situations that completely explode the false dichotomy the IRPGF set up here. The section on pacifists and radicals from To Our Friends really says all that needs saying on this subject.

Their first major interview seems to have been with the site "Enough is Enough". In this interview, they reiterate their weird "pacifism or guns" binary, and throw a few smears against Omar Aziz's memory into the mix:

“Omar Aziz was a self-described anarchist who was committed to non-violent resistance. However, this commitment only resulted in his movement’s inability to defend itself against State repression, with his local councils never reaching their full potential and himself dying in prison. On the other hand, the YPJ/G, which grew out of armed defense groups formed in response to the Qamişlo riots of 2004, has proven to be the only force on the ground capable of resisting state hegemony and fascism. Peaceful methods will only result in either the maintenance of the status quo and/or death for those employing them – so either pick up the gun and join the armed resistance now or prepare yourself to be able to do so when the time comes.”

This potted history manages to be inaccurate and insulting on a number of levels – not only does it show a complete lack of understanding of Aziz’s position, it also glosses over the fact that Rojava was not liberated by the YPJ/G defeating Assad’s troops, but by his decision to pull out of the region and focus on fighting rebels elsewhere, as well as the continuing existence of other local councils outside state or fascist control. Since Aziz’s actual text included a section entitled “On the relationship with the Free Syrian Army: The need to protect communities while continuing the revolution”, it’s pretty clear that the attempt to portray our dead comrade as some kind of dogmatic pacifist doesn’t really stick.

Of course, it’s fine to not know much about Omar Aziz – no-one knows everything, I didn’t know much about him myself until recently. But where we don’t know much about a subject, it’s usually better to keep quiet rather than to shoot one’s mouth off and end up smearing the dead.

In a lengthy interview with CrimethInc, the IRPGF set out their ideology in more detail. It also contains some really notably weird sections, such as

“This brings us to an important theoretical position that we hold as the IRPGF. For us, we believe that many of the international supporters, specifically most Westerners, reproduce their privilege and social position here in Rojava. We want to introduce the concept of the “safe struggle.” That is to say that, since this war is supported by the United States and Western powers, it is safe to fight against the enemy and not face the repercussions for being in an organization whose ideology is Apoist (Apo is an affectionate nickname for Abdullah Öcalan, one of the founding members of the PKK), and therefore linked to a declared terrorist organization. There is no real penalty for involvement in Rojava except if one has direct links to some of the more radical groups here. For example, Turkish nationals who fight with the groups here are declared terrorists by the state of Turkey and even the comrades of the Marxist-Leninist Party (Communist Reconstruction) were arrested and imprisoned leading to their offices being closed across Spain on charges that they had links to the PKK. These unique cases aside, the vast majority of international supporters who come to fight Daesh and help the Kurds are safe from prosecution.”

The first thing to note here is that they’re using an utterly berserk definition of “safety”. I can’t imagine that, for instance, Albert Avery Harrington, Paolo Todd, Jordan MacTaggart, Ryan Lock, Dean Evans, or Konstandinos Erik Scurfield, or at least their families, would be particularly impressed if you told them they were taking part in a “safe struggle”. Secondly, even if we take their perverse definition of “safe” as “if you survive the war, the cops won’t be after you when you

get home” at face value, it’s still not that accurate – as well as the cases they mention, there’s also the cases of Shilan Ozcelik and Aiden Aslin. “These people are safe from prosecution, except for all the numerous cases of people who’ve been prosecuted” is not the most convincing argument.

And, of course, even if what they were saying made sense, there’d still be the question of why it matters. Certainly, it will sometimes be necessary to do dangerous things, but to sneer at “safety” for the sake of it, as if being in danger was inherently better, is to fall into the same kinds of stupidity as people who complain about the black bloc being cowards for hiding their identity, or complain about antifascists not being brave enough if we engage with fascists while heavily outnumbering them. We’re not playing by the Marquis of Queensbury rules, and the point isn’t to show how brave we are; the point is to win.

Later in the CrimethInc interview, there’s a really frustrating moment where they draw close to saying that specific local situations matter more than abstractions, and then turn around and retreat to generalisations again:

“...there is no general formula for how much armed struggle is necessary to initiate and advance the revolutionary process, nor at which point it should commence, if at all. For the IRPGF, we recognize that each group, collective, community, and neighborhood must ultimately decide when they initiate armed struggle. Armed struggle is contextual to the specific location and situation. For example, whereas throwing a Molotov cocktail at police is fairly normalized in the Exarchia neighborhood in Athens, Greece, in the United States the person throwing it would be shot dead by the police. Each particular local context has a different threshold for what the state allows in terms of violence. However, this is not an excuse for inaction. We believe that armed struggle is necessary.”

So, in one breath they say there’s no general rule for how much, if any, armed struggle is needed, and then in the next it’s back to just “armed struggle is necessary” – not “necessary in certain situations where the energy of the insurrectionary forces have failed to sufficiently paralyse the old state”, just necessary full stop. This kind of stuff really is no different to dogmatic pacifism – the magic ingredient might be armed struggle instead of non-violence, but the insistence that no recipe is complete without a good sprinkling of their favoured nostrum is the same.

In another interview, with Rojava Solidarity NYC, they raise the comparison with international volunteers in Spain, which is an interesting point:

“During the Spanish Civil War, tens of thousands of international volunteers and revolutionaries traveled to Spain from as far as China to show their solidarity and give their lives for a revolution that unfortunately proved to be unsuccessful. During the Syrian Civil War today, less than a thousand international revolutionaries have come to support and defend the ongoing social revolution in Rojava. We asked ourselves – how could it be that in the age of the Internet, air travel, and a thus vastly interconnected world was there such a lack of substantial international solidarity. We have heard criticisms from those who pay lip service to the Spanish Civil War, yet attempt to shame those that travel to Rojava with terms such as adventurists, imperialists, racists, and more. However, it is precisely those who level such critiques and do not

show their physical solidarity here in Rojava who are the real racists, islamophobes, and imperialists. Instead of risking their comfort, privilege, and craft beer, they remain on their cushions, enjoying the material comforts provided by the imperialist and colonialist powers that have created the fascist monsters in this region.”

Of course, if you actually want to understand the world around us, “people nowadays are not as good as people back then because they like cushions and craft beer too much” is not a particularly helpful explanation. To understand why people do the things they do – whether that’s people in the 1930s volunteering for the International Brigades, or people today not volunteering for the International Brigades – it helps to understand where they come from, the cultures and contexts that shaped them. It’s true that I’ve never volunteered to serve in an overseas conflict, but it’s equally true, and equally meaningful, to point out that I’m not a product of a culture that existed in the early decades of the 20th century in the South Wales coalfields, or the East End Jewish community, or Clydeside or the Ruhr or wherever. In order to have a mass international mobilisation like the International Brigades, you first need to have cultures of solidarity like the ones that shaped those volunteers. How we get from here to there is a big question, but just going “people who criticise me are racist islamophobic imperialists who drink craft beer” does absolutely nothing at all to help answer it.

To be fair, the RSNYC interview does contain some pretty solid and unobjectionable stuff, but it’s mixed in with yet more of the gun fever, Uzi lover stuff: in response to a question about what skills and practices anarchists should develop, they tell us that “people must learn to live communally and develop the skills to carry out armed struggle.” Given the current state of the anarchist movement, telling people that they should concentrate on moving in with other anarchists and target practice seems more like instructions for forming a cult than anything else. It is worth acknowledging that this is offset by some other stuff later on that does suggest a desire to build relationships outside of the anarchist ghetto, but that feels more like an afterthought: the main priorities are clear, and the dull stuff that doesn’t involve guns is just not as exciting.

As far as I’m aware, the most recent IRPGF interview was with the site Insurrection News. This has another swipe at anyone who criticises them: this time, they declare of their critics that “the idea of practical solidarity is silly or unrealistic to them. They will praise the revolution but treat it like it is another world, unconnected and irrelevant to our lives. They will say “but there is work to be done here! why go over there and get involved in that struggle when there is a struggle in your home?!” This is based on the unquestioned false assumption that there are different, unrelated struggles that should be prioritized based on geography or whatever other convenient reasons for avoiding risk and sacrifice.”

The problem here is that the false assumption they criticise is precisely that, a false one, and I’m not sure if anyone actually believes it. If different struggles actually were separate and unrelated, then there might be a binary choice to be made between getting involved with struggles elsewhere and ones at home; but it’s because we live in a world of connected struggles that it’s possible to meaningfully support developments elsewhere without necessarily travelling halfway around the world to do so.

If a genuinely powerful and effective subversive movement were to emerge in any of the NATO countries, then such a movement would be able to provide practical solidarity to revolutionary projects in Rojava, not least by making trouble for the interests of the Turkish state, given the connections between that state and its NATO allies; this point is especially true for the EU coun-

tries, due to the deals where Fortress Europe outsources some of its most brutal border policing to Turkey. Equally, it's possible that an effective Kurdish solidarity campaign might be able to lobby governments to lift the ban on certain other Apoist parties, something that the IRPGF might sneer at but would certainly be welcomed within the broad Apoist movement itself; but the construction of that campaign as a real political force would require it to be rooted in "struggles here."

The Insurrection News interview also features a bit more discussion of the connections between the YPG/J and the various imperialist powers operating in the region. We get a lot of stuff about balancing principles and pragmatism, and are told that:

"Any revolutionary force, if it is to be successful, must maintain a confluent balance and integration of principle and pragmatism. In the case of imperialist, nation-state and counter-revolutionary forces generally, there is little to be said about principle in any genuine or pure sense anyway; they are purely opportunistic according to their basic interests. The forces of the Rojava revolution may be the only players in the region who are not motivated by opportunism as the US, its allies and its capitalist nation-state enemies so thoroughly are."

This is untrue at least twice over: firstly because, once again, it erases the existence of non-Kurdish Syrian revolutionaries, and secondly because, whatever you make of Islamist reactionary forces like ISIS, "opportunistic" is a pretty misleading and unhelpful way to characterise them. Their principles and ideology are disgusting, and need to be fought against and defeated, but they clearly are really driven by that ideology; to try and read them as purely self-interested, opportunistic rational capitalist/imperialist actors would be a mistake.

After weighing up their co-operation with the various capitalist powers fighting in the region, they move on to discussing other volunteers, and mention that "as long as the things they do and say are not too egregious, they are generally accepted and treated more or less like family... In general, we have seen that it takes quite a lot of ignorance and acting out to be forced out of a tabur and this is something that as anarchists is difficult to accept / agree with."

This is pretty much a side note, but it is extremely funny that, after spending several paragraphs justifying why, as revolutionary anarchists, they can accept co-operating with the US, Russian, and Assadist armed forces because "there is no purity in war", apparently this is where they have to draw the line. *Actively helping a brutal, murderously counter-revolutionary state conquer territory from a popular uprising? Sure, you have to make hard decisions sometimes, need to get our hands dirty, no-one's perfect and so on. An international volunteer with this beleaguered military force made some problematic jokes, or otherwise seemed to be not too up on their theory, and people just kind of put up with it instead of telling them to go home? Woah, now that really is difficult to stomach.*

Towards the end of the interview, they mention a list of groups whose "legacy... we are proud of and stand in strict solidarity with", including the Weathermen/Weather Underground. Without going through the whole list one by one, it's worth just saying that the Weathermen were a deeply authoritarian Stalinist cult with terrifying internal dynamics. There's something very odd about seeing this kind of stuff on a site like Insurrection News, as insurrectionary anarchists have traditionally prided themselves on having a very sharp critique of the left; apparently, for some, criticisms of authoritarian, hierarchical leftist sects have merit up until the point where

those sects start picking up weapons, at which point any old Stalinist nonsense becomes worthy of admiration.

There is another point to be made about the US armed groups they admire, one that ties back directly to the Syrian conflict. To quote from the translator's introduction to "The Formation of Local Councils" once again:

"The main Assadist counter-insurgency strategy has been to transform a popular uprising into a civil war, forcing the opposition to militarize and favouring its most reactionary elements. Drawing on the analysis of Yassin al-Haj Saleh, we can talk about three tendencies within the Syrian conflict: revolution, civil war, and proxy war. All three tendencies have been present throughout and continue to be factors, but generally there was a chronological progression from revolution to civil war to proxy war, each of which also has forms of social organizing attached to them. The revolution is characterized by the local councils and their associated local self-defense groups that are more or less answerable to popular structures. As the conflict territorialized and large coalitions of rebel groups that were not accountable to grassroots formations emerged, the conflict increasingly became a civil war. The push towards civil war is strongly characterized by the power of counter-revolutionary Islamist groups, especially ISIS and al-Nusra/Fatah al-Sham. Those groups then, in turn, became more and more dependent on their outside sponsors, and the political concerns of external states came to dominate; thus, the situation became the proxy war that currently confronts us."

The relevance here is that, just as the militarized armed struggle that so excites the IRPGF is a consequence of the success of the Assadist counter-insurgency strategy, the US armed groups whose legacy they take up were also products of COINTELPRO and the broader defeats of the 60s. The Revolutionary Youth Movement, which became the Weathermen, emerged out of, and contributed to, the fossilisation and fracturing of SDS and the New Left, and anarchists at the time vividly mocked their deadening, cult-like politics. Similarly, the isolated, specialised militancy of the Black Liberation Army was a product of the defeat of the Black Panthers and black power more broadly.

The IRPGF concede that these groups were defeated due to their lack of connections with a broader, aboveground movement, but don't manage to follow this train of thought long enough to notice that their emergence was a result of the decay of those movements. From the US in the 60s/70s to Rojava today, it seems like the IRPGF are less interested in the messiness and uncertainty of real mass revolts and insurrectionary moments, and much keener on the more structured, specialised conflicts that result when the state manages to reimpose a military logic on the situation.

In the criticisms that they do make of their armed-Stalinist/Maoist predecessors, we get a fuller depiction of the guerrilla mindset at work:

"...we do believe that most armed struggle groups missed a key component that is necessary for a successful armed movement. This component is the above-ground, social political wing that can continue to operate and provide for people while the underground, militant wing attacks the State by any means necessary. If either wing

is missing from the equation, it is much easier to crush a revolutionary movement. Clearly, a solely above-ground group that organizes around social issues will only be allowed to take the movement so far and will remain helpless without an armed, underground unit to terrorize and preoccupy the State. Likewise, a solely underground group of armed revolutionaries only lasts as long as they can evade the State, which is a time that is severely decreased when there is no complimentary above-ground group to garner support, educate, revolutionize social relationships, fundraise, recruit, and so on. Note that the term ‘above ground group’ here is just a symbolic term that may literally refer to a single group or to the entire public revolutionary political infrastructure, spanning from coast to coast. Regardless, it is safe to say that at this point, while there are definitely small pockets of revolutionary activity within the US that have done great work in the social sphere, there is not a cohesive, serious movement with a clear and relevant revolutionary horizon (vision / aim / goal) that can address and attack State-caused trauma while also supporting an underground, militant group.”

To give credit where it’s due, this vision does at least acknowledge that other people outside their vanguards will have some role to play, so it stops short of being a full-on superhero fantasy. But if we take a look at the two components they imagine working together – “the above-ground, social political wing that can continue to operate and provide for people while the underground, militant wing attacks the State by any means necessary” – it is unmistakably clear that this is a vision of a small group of active participants and a larger mass of relatively passive spectators. Hiding guerrillas in our basements and cooking for them might well be a more exciting way of lending support to our representatives than just marking a ballot paper, but the leader/follower distinction is there all the same.

What’s missing from this vision is the possibility of mass militancy, the prospect that large numbers of people can come into conflict with the state on their own terms, not as auxiliaries to a specialised underground force. But this idea isn’t just some wild fantasy, it’s something that’s actually happened again and again, in uprisings and insurrections from Soweto to London to Charlotte to Daraya. It’s this prospect – the possibilities that open up when people start acting for themselves, creating new ways of life and actively defending their projects against the state – that informs the vision of any anarchism worthy of the name. Without it, we’re just left with plain old vanguardism.

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