nationhood beyond nationalism

towards an anarchist politics of anticolonial liberation

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In its Spring 2001 issue, the Oregon-based magazine *Green Anarchy* ran an anonymous article with the title: "The EZLN is NOT Anarchist: Or Struggles at the Margins and Revolutionary Solidarity." Writing from an anarchist perspective, the author advanced a fierce critique of the Zapatista National Liberation Army—the militant anticolonial, anticapitalist Indigenous movement which had led an uprising and established autonomous zones in southern Mexico several years before, and which is often cited by anarchists as an example of a successful experiment in decentralized, anti-authoritarian revolutionary politics. In the article, the author excoriated the Zapatistas for having supposedly "made themselves the public spokespeople for the struggle in Chiapas and [channeling] it into reformist demands and appeals to nationalism" rather than upholding genuine anarchist principles. Several months later, in the Spring 2002 issue of *Green Anarchy*, a member of the Zapatistas penned a scathing reply, writing:

> Our struggle was raging before anarchism was even a word, much less an ideology with newspapers and disciples. Our struggle is older than Bakunin or Kropotkin. Even though anarchists and syndicates have fought bravely with us, we are not willing to lower our history to meet some narrow ideology exported from the same countries we fought against in our Wars for independence.

In his influential 2005 essay "Post-Colonial Anarchism," the anarchist writer Roger White sharply criticizes what he perceives to be a pervasive current of chauvinism running through much of the Western—and in particular, the North American—anarchist left. Citing the aforementioned exchange in the pages of *Green Anarchy*, White argues that rather than establishing successful stateless projects or formations of their own, North American anarchists have instead placed an undue emphasis on theorizing about anarchist politics, engaging in what he calls a "busy intellectualism that has scorned and turned its nose up at our national struggles for liberation as 'statist' and 'reformist' while demanding that global south anti-authoritarians adopt anarchism's workerist mantle or conform to some romantic notion of how pre-agricultural peoples lived."

This critique is not without merit. It's true that the North American anarchist left has often tended to conceptualize anarchism not as a broad and inclusive set of anti-authoritarian political principles, but rather as a narrowly-defined yardstick against which to judge the ideological

purity of real-world left projects, including anticolonial liberation movements—and with which to beat said movements over the head when they fail to measure up. The *Green Anarchy* episode is an illustrative example of this tendency, and in particular, it is in many ways the perfect encapsulation of a deep-seated tension within the anarchist left when it comes to engaging with anticolonial politics. After all, at the heart of the original author's critique of the Zapatistas is the accusation that the movement framed its demands in terms of *national* identity, thereby succumbing to a nationalist politics that is anathema to the fundamental principles of anarchism.

And yet, while the substance of this critique is certainly undermined by the profoundly arrogant and condescending manner in which it was expressed in this particular case, the contradiction underlying it is worth taking seriously. It is precisely that contradiction which concerns me in this essay: how, if at all, should anarchists engage with what in early 20th-century radical circles was often referred to as the 'national question?' Or, to put it more specifically, how can anarchists reconcile a principled skepticism of nationalism and the nation-state with the urgent need to stand in solidarity with anticolonial struggles for national liberation?

The structure of the international order as we know it is predicated, and has been for at least the last few centuries, on the assumption that the nation-state form is the only viable and legitimate model of political organization. As such, virtually every anticolonial struggle in recent memory, with just a handful of notable exceptions, has articulated itself in explicitly nationalist terms. This means, however, that the Western anarchist left often finds itself struggling with the uncomfortable dilemma of how to balance a principled opposition to colonialism on the one hand with an equally principled opposition to nationalism on the other.

After all, as Maia Ramnath writes in the first chapter of her 2011 book *Decolonizing Anarchism*, colonial rule is "one of the most concentrated forms of power in history, incorporating extreme modes of domination, dispossession, and racial hierarchy" (15). If anarchism is, at its core, about the unequivocal rejection of all unjust relations of hierarchy and domination, then it seems clear, given the nature of colonialism, that any anarchist politics worth its salt must necessarily be intertwined with a politics of anticolonial solidarity. And yet, there is little doubt in my mind that anarchists' suspicion of nationalism is thoroughly justified in its apprehension of nationalism's tendency to rapidly devolve into exclusionary chauvinism and violent ethnic and religious hatred. A quick glance at the recent historical record reveals that this tendency is not limited to the West, as evidenced by the rise of far-right national populism and ethnonationalist hate politics in formerly colonized countries such as Brazil and India. How, then, should today's anarchist left reckon with this seemingly inescapable contradiction?

The answer, I think, begins with rethinking the way in which we relate to the idea of 'the nation' as a political community. As Ramnath points out in *Decolonizing Anarchism*, there are two primary opposing currents in anarchist thought when it comes to the origins and nature of 'the nation'. On the one hand, there is Mikhail Bakunin, who took a primordial view of nationality, calling it a "natural and social fact" predicated on the essential assumption that "every people and the smallest folk-unit has its own character, its own specific mode of existence, its own way of speaking, feeling, thinking, and acting." On the other hand, thinkers such as Rudolf Rocker rejected this essentialist view of nationhood as a "fairy tale," instead arguing that "the nation is

not the cause, but the result, of the state. It is the state which creates the nation, not the nation the state."

The dangers of Bakunin's view are not difficult to discern—as Ramnath points out, "it's a slippery slope from the praise of a *völkisch* spirit to a mysticism of blood and soil, to chauvinism and fascism" (24). On its face, then, it is Rocker's perspective—that the nation is the product of the state, and not the other way around—that seems to be most intuitively accurate. It is, indeed, this view that has the greatest currency among the contemporary anarchist left, for whom it is practically a truism to point out that the nation is a social construct whose very foundations are linked to the state form. And it is this view that lies, in large part, at the heart of anarchists' inclination to dismiss out of hand even the *possibility* of a politics that is based on the nation as a unit of political community.

But what if we are too hasty to dismiss the idea of nationhood simply by virtue of its being a social construct? Rocker may well be correct in arguing that the nation is the product of the state, but in the context of colonialism and anticolonial resistance, this statist genealogy may in fact hold a liberatory potential that is worth taking seriously. After all, insofar as the national identities invoked by many anticolonial liberation movements *are* the product of the state, it is arguably because they are the product of the uniquely oppressive *colonial* state, and therefore have the capability to coalesce around the shared experiences of colonial subjugation and anticolonial resistance, rather than blood-and-soil origin myths, as their primary points of unity. Certainly, this is not a foregone conclusion—many national liberation movements throughout history *have* contained alarming strands of ethnic and cultural chauvinism. It is also true, however, that for many anticolonial movements, leaders, and thinkers, articulations of national identity that derive their unity from the shared experience of colonization have offered a powerful alternative to these more culturalist formulations. Such a conception of nationhood in the context of anticolonialism is, as Maia Ramnath puts it, a form of "strategic identity politics, evoked by the context of resistance, where the assertion of collective existence and demand for recognition functions as a stand against genocide, apartheid, systemic discrimination, or forced assimilation to a dominant norm" (21).

Perhaps, then, we ought to draw a distinction between nation*hood* and national*ism*—to consider the possibility, in other words, that even though the two are often considered to be inextricably linked, there may in fact be room for an anticolonial politics that recognizes the political salience of national identity while simultaneously rejecting nationalism in all its statist and chauvinistic dimensions. In order to distinguish the two, of course, it is important to be clear about what exactly we mean when we talk about 'nationalism.' I am compelled by the formulation offered by Ramnath, who conceptualizes nationalism not as the natural and singular political form for the nation to take, but rather as a *particular* ideology of the nation, at the core of which lies the "fundamental assumption" that "in order for a people to be recognized as holders of collective rights and freedoms, it must be constituted as a nation duly manifested in a state: an exclusive institution defined by its monopoly on sanctioned force and revenue extraction" (19).

Such a framework is useful because it allows us to separate the nation, understood as a unit of political community, from *nationalism* proper, understood as an ideology which seeks to fuse and equate that community with the state form. Through this conceptual decoupling, we open up the space to imagine alternative models of anticolonial politics that neither deny the existence of national communities *nor* frame their demands for national liberation in the language of statehood and sovereignty. What I am describing, in other words, is a politics of nationhood beyond

nationalism, of self-determination beyond the state. And while such a politics may be relatively marginal in the history of anticolonial liberation movements, it's worth bearing in mind that marginality is not the same as nonexistence. Examples of the type of politics I am describing here include the Zapatista movement in Mexico, as well as the Kurdish revolution in Rojava—in addition, arguably, to Indigenous movements for autonomy, land restitution, and environmental justice across the world.

While these projects vary widely in many key respects, what they share is a powerful anticolonial current that is oriented toward the cause of national liberation while simultaneously envisioning alternative models of autonomy, self-determination, and radically democratic governance that are not bound by the limits of the modern nation-state. Rather than sitting around and admonishing these movements for not being 'anarchist enough,' perhaps Western anarchists would do well to learn a thing or two from them.

Drawing such a distinction between nationhood and nationalism is useful not only because it opens up our conceptual horizons, but also because it allows us to sharpen and enrich the critique of nationalism that is so central to anarchist politics. The conventional wisdom in non-anarchist circles suggests that nationalism, particularly of the anticolonial variety, represents an assertion of empowerment and agency for colonized peoples. The nationalist cause, we are told, represents a movement for the revitalization of cultures and histories that colonization has tried to deny, suppress, and erase. However, if we begin with the assumption that, as I have outlined here, nationalism's defining feature is its attempt to link nationhood to the modern state as a political and associational model, then perhaps this conventional wisdom is less straightforward than it appears to be.

In the introduction to an edited collection of essays on 'Anarchism and the national question,' José Gutiérrez and Ruth Kinna (2023) write that "the questions anarchists ask are about [the] impact that statism has on histories, cultures, religions, languages and movements of peoples and how these facets of human existence can be enhanced without recourse to the state" (126). In other words, anarchists who engage with the 'national question' are, or at least ought to be, concerned with the ways in which the fundamentally statist dimensions of nationalism as an ideology can shape and even constrain the bounds of national identity. Particularly in a postcolonial context, where newly independent states face tremendous pressure from all fronts, it seems to me that the totalizing nature of the state creates the need for a constructed sense of 'national unity.' The problem, however, is that the process of constructing such a unity naturally lends itself to a nationalist politics that flattens and homogenizes the internal diversity of a given society. Perhaps, then, rather than allowing the national community to thrive, the state form prescribed by nationalist politics may in fact have the opposite effect—imposing a rigid veneer of monolithic unity which stifles the organic development of the national identity and prevents it from flourishing in all its rich multiplicity. As Ramnath writes:

> it's the specter of stateness—the pressure to establish your own, or to resist the aggression of someone else's—that calls forth the enforcement of internal conformity, elimination of elements who fail or refuse to conform, and relentless policing of boundaries (22).

An anarchist engagement with the 'national question,' then, must necessarily be oriented first and foremost towards reclaiming the project of national liberation from the discursive prison of nationalist politics. Nationalist movements in the colonized world are often referred to in mainstream left discourse as 'national liberation struggles.' However, the entrenched persistence of colonial relations of hierarchy and subjugation in formerly colonized societies indicates that in many cases, what these movements actually managed to achieve was not, in fact, wholesale *liberation* from colonial oppression in its various forms, but rather the *political emancipation* of the national community in the form of legal independence.

This is an important distinction to draw—emancipation may well be a significant element of national liberation, but they are not one and the same. As the real-world experience of postcolonial states shows us, independence alone is not sufficient to bring about the full liberation of the national community. And given the overwhelming extent to which postcolonial states have inherited not only the structures and institutions of their colonial predecessors, but also their fundamental logics of governance, it follows that genuine national liberation can never be achieved within the confines of the state. A more radical rupture is necessary to fully realize the project of anticolonial liberation, but such a rupture is impossible so long as we remain constrained by a narrow conception of nationhood that denies the possibility of a national politics beyond nationalism.

As anarchists in the West, the task facing us is therefore to articulate a new politics of anticolonial solidarity—one which honors anarchism's principled rejection of nationalism, but which refuses to throw the baby out with the nationalist bathwater. Particularly in the present moment, when the structures and logics of colonialism continue to manifest and replicate themselves in everything from the rise of the global far-right to the militarized administration of border imperialism to the existential menace of the climate crisis, such a politics is more direly needed now than ever before. Without it, the goal of genuine liberation from colonialism and its violent afterlives is unlikely to ever amount to anything more than a distant pipe dream.

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