

Exchange on “Black Flame”

Spencer Sunshine and Lucien van der Walt

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Anarchist Studies, which describes itself as “an inter-disciplinary journal of scholarly research into the history, culture and theory of anarchism”, some time back carried a critical review of Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt’s *Black Flame: the revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism* by Spencer Sunshine. Lucien van der Walt was permitted to write a reply, which addressed some of the issues raised by Sunshine... Both parts are included below.

In summary, Sunshine’s review praised *Black Flame* for “the best assemblage of research I have encountered on classical anarchism’s complex relationship to questions of nationalism, imperialism and race”, and its “stress on the rich anarchist and syndicalist traditions in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean,” “a ‘crucial corrective to Eurocentric accounts’”. However, he also claimed the book was “infuriating”, since it had a “highly unusual” definition of anarchism (i.e. anarchism as a form of libertarian socialism), leading to the exclusion of the (so-called) “philosophical, individualist, spiritual and ‘lifestyle’ traditions” (supposedly the “majority” of today’s anarchists).

In response, Lucien van der Walt noted that Sunshine provided no serious evidence to refute the book’s core theses e.g. that the global anarchist movement emerged in the First International, that syndicalism is an integral part ... that this tradition centres on rationalism, socialism and anti-authoritarianism ... the writings of Mikhail Bakunin and Pyotr Kropotkin ... and that this ‘narrow’ definition is both empirically defensible and analytically useful”. In presenting the book’s view of anarchism as a “highly unusual”, he ended up having to present the views of pretty much all major anarchists and syndicalist activists and movements as “highly unusual” forms of anarchism, and to do this through the use of loaded rhetoric.

Below, I include first the review, followed by the refutation:

REVIEW

Anarchist Studies 18.1, pp. 113–115

Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, Edinburgh & Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009

Black Flame is an intriguing and infuriating work which deserves to be read and debated. Rich in both theory and history, the authors say their conclusions are ‘quite striking’ and result in a ‘rethinking’ of the anarchist canon (p.17). Furthermore, they very fairly say that ‘if this book succeeds in promoting new research into anarchism, even if that research contradicts our arguments, we consider our work well done’ (pp.26–7). However, the particularities of the argument, and the tone in which they are presented, distract from the possibilities of serious discussion regarding many of the book’s stances.

Of particular interest is the last chapter, which is the best assemblage of research I have encountered on classical anarchism’s complex relationship to questions of nationalism, imperialism and race. *Black Flame*’s stress on the rich anarchist and syndicalist traditions in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean serves as a ‘crucial corrective to Eurocentric accounts’ (p.21). Also of much interest is the careful explanation of the differences between different syndicalist unions.

Black Flame is also important in that it situates anarchism in its social and historical context. The authors argue that the notion of anarchism as a timeless part of human existence originates in Paul Eltzbacher’s 1900 book *Anarchism*. It is only afterwards that anarchists themselves (espe-

cially Kropotkin) incorporate this idea into their own beliefs. *Black Flame* notes that ‘if anarchism is a universal feature of society, then it becomes difficult indeed to explain why it arises, or to place it in historical context, to delineate its boundaries, and analyze its class character and role at a particular time.’ Therefore the traditional perspective ‘fails to historicize the broad anarchist tradition, or explain why it arose as well as why it appealed to particular classes’ (p.18).

The authors stress the necessity of a bounded definition of anarchism for scholarship: ‘A good definition is one that highlights the distinguishing features of a given category, does so in a coherent fashion, and is able to differentiate that category from others, thereby organizing knowledge as well as enabling effective analysis and research’ (p.43).

Unfortunately, their definition is achieved through a series of retroactive baptisms and excommunications. What they call the ‘broad anarchist tradition’ is actually exceedingly narrow in relation to self-identified anarchists. They start with ‘class struggle anarchism’ (which includes anarcho-communists, Platformists, the Friends of Durruti and Galleanist insurrectionists), and to this they add syndicalism – as such. Almost the entire membership of every global syndicalist union receives a mass anarchist baptism, along with Daniel DeLeon and James Connolly. In one rhetorical move, the ‘broad anarchist tradition’ gains millions of adherents.

But excommunicated are (what are quite possibly) the majority of today’s self-identified anarchists. This includes the entirety of the philosophical, individualist, spiritual and ‘lifestyle’ traditions. The authors say ‘we do not regard these currents as part of the broad anarchist tradition ... “Class struggle” anarchism, sometimes called revolutionary or communist anarchism, is not a type of anarchism; in our view, it is the only anarchism’ (p.19). They disagree with Murray Bookchin for even using the derogatory term ‘lifestyle anarchism’, since ‘it is incorrect to label these sects anarchist at all; they have no place in the anarchist tradition, for they are not anarchist’ (p.170). (Yet, according to their cosmology, Bookchin is also not an anarchist!)

Their highly unusual definition is based on the claim that anarchism can be defined solely by the moment when Bakunin, during his stint in the International, authored some (arguably) narrowly workerist tracts. *Black Flame* claims syndicalism emerges directly from this period of Bakunin; correspondingly, they dub him an ‘unreserved’ syndicalist (p.134). They attempt to enrol many other anarchists as syndicalists, for example arguing that Errico Malatesta can be seen as ‘an outright syndicalist’ (p.202). Kropotkin, they claim, wrote *Mutual Aid* ‘to prove the possibility of a free socialist society, which was to be created by a class revolution’ (p.302). Meanwhile, inconveniently proto-fascist syndicalists like Sorel and Labriola are excommunicated from this ‘broad’ tradition by similar rhetorical manoeuvres.

The authors are owed a great credit for their comprehensive assemblage of research on nationalism and imperialism, and for making the long overdue call to re-situate the classical tradition in its social and historical context. But their grand claims regarding what constitutes the misnamed ‘broad anarchist tradition’ strike me not only as unconvincing, but as unhistorical. Indeed, I actually found many of the positions *Black Flame* argues against – such as the notion that anarchism can be understood as a ‘point of intersection of several ideologies’ (p.40), and that anarchism and syndicalism are ‘different, albeit overlapping, tendencies’ (p.149) – to be far more convincing than the book’s own claims.

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RESPONSE. *Black Flame* and the broad anarchist tradition: a reply to Spencer Sunshine

Anarchist Studies 18.1, pp. 115–117

As Michael Schmidt and I noted in the opening chapter of *Black Flame: the revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism*, our book achieves its main aim when it provokes debate about the ideas, history and relevance of the broad anarchist tradition. As we wrote, ‘good scholarship proceeds through debate, rather than the creation of new orthodoxies’. We welcome challenges and corrections based on research. It is in this spirit that we read Spencer Sunshine’s review.

Yet debate is only fruitful when due care is taken to substantiate claims, and to argue points. And, regrettably, our reviewer has been rather careless in developing his criticisms, relying on the use of polemical language, assertions rather than refutations, and trivial anecdote.

Sunshine suggests that the ‘particularities of the argument’ in *Black Flame* detract from ‘the possibilities of serious discussion regarding many of the book’s stances’. The ‘particularities of the argument’ are, however, precisely what require ‘serious discussion’. And ‘serious discussion’ is what his review lacks.

Rather than provide a substantive and substantiated criticism of *Black Flame*’s core theses, the reviewer relies instead on loaded language to delegitimise those theses. Thus, Michael and I (he claims) operate essentially through a series of ‘retroactive baptisms and excommunications’ and the construction of a ‘cosmology’ via ‘rhetorical manoeuvres’. Sunshine thus deploys religious metaphors in an attempt to negate the weight of evidence and logical argument that the book (the first in a set of two) develops over nearly 400 pages via an unmatched and genuinely global survey of 150 years of anarchist history on five continents. The vast synthesis involved, the textual evidence, the broad sweep of history, the innumerable cases cited – these are trivialised by a labelling strategy strong on style and imagery, but rather short on content.

No evidence is adduced to dispute our core theses: that the global anarchist movement emerged in the First International, that syndicalism is an integral part of the broad anarchist tradition, that this tradition centres on rationalism, socialism and anti-authoritarianism, that the writings of Mikhail Bakunin and Pyotr Kropotkin are representative of its core ideas, and that this ‘narrow’ definition is both empirically defensible and analytically useful.

Sunshine, having presented the authors as pronouncing *ex cathedra*, tends, in short, to base his major critique on assertions of faith, rather than demonstrations of fact.

He then claims, in all seriousness, that *Black Flame* has a ‘highly unusual’ understanding of the anarchist tradition. *Black Flame* has sinned in having ‘excommunicated’ what is (‘quite possibly’) the ‘majority’ of ‘today’s self-identified anarchists’, the so-called ‘philosophical, individualist, spiritual and “lifestyle” traditions’.

This time some evidence is provided – but it is mere anecdote. Personal impressions of a small segment of (an implicitly all-American) scene are offered as a refutation of a scholarly survey of 150 years of global history. Sunshine is himself understandably a bit unsure about the validity of generalising from such data: thus, the caveat ‘quite possibly’.

We now find ourselves in an analytical *cul-de-sac* where the views of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta, Emma Goldman, Lucy Parsons, Liu Sifu, Ricardo Flores Magón, Nicolás Gutarra, T.W. Thibedi, Nestor Makhno, Juana Belém Gutiérrez de Mendoza, Kôtuku Shûsui, Shin Ch’aeho,

Ba Jin, James Connolly, Chu Cha-Pei and many, many others, and the politics of organisations like the Spanish CNT/CGT, the Australian IWW, the Bolivian FOL, the Mexican CGT, the Uruguayan FAU/OPR-33, the South African ISL/IWA, the Hunan Workers' Association, the Eastern Anarchist League, the Black Flag Alliance, *Ghadr*, the Bulgarian FAKB, Egypt's International Union of Workers and Employees, the Russian SKT and many, many others are treated as exemplifying 'highly unusual' aspects of the anarchist tradition. A mere byway in a tradition supposedly embodied by certain 'philosophical, individualist, spiritual and "lifestyle" traditions' – in America, today. Having argued along these lines, Sunshine concludes with the odd claim that it is, in fact, *Black Flame's* analysis that 'strikes' the reader as 'unconvincing' and 'unhistorical'.

Again, however, the problem is an analysis centred on style (in this case, reducing anarchism to 'self-identity'), rather than on substance (movement politics and praxis).

Sunshine's review is correct in noting that *Black Flame* argues for a bounded, historical, precise definition of anarchism, and that the work aims at developing a 'crucial corrective to Eurocentric accounts'. His curt dismissal of the book, however, rests upon precisely the rather shaky analyses of anarchism and syndicalism that the book contests.

There is little room for generative debate in this sort of intervention, and it would be a pity if readers of *Anarchist Studies* were to dismiss *Black Flame* as a result of this review.

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