"Come O Lions! Let Us Cause a Mutiny"

Anarchism and the Subaltern

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> Come O Lions! Let Us Cause a Mutiny[1]
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> "By marking our own text with the signs of battle, we hope to go a little further towards a more open and self-aware discourse." – Partha Chatterjee[2]

In the aftermath of the failed revolutions of 1848, the exiled Russian radical Mikhail Bakunin published a pamphlet titled *Appeal to the Slavs by a Russian Patriot.* Bakunin, not yet an anarchist but already showing anarchistic tendencies, called for the destruction of the Austrian Empire and the establishment of a federation of free Slav republics. Typical to what would later become the anarchist analysis for which he is known, Bakunin asserted that the peasantry was the revolutionary class that would be the decisive force in bringing down capitalism and empire. In reference to the uprisings, Bakunin praised what he called the "revolutionary spirit" of "all those who suffered under the yoke of foreign powers."[3] He called for greater solidarity among the colonized and warned against doctrinaire ideology:

> "The oppression of one is the oppression of all, and we cannot violate the liberty of one being without violating the freedom of all of us. The social question…cannot be resolved either by a preconceived theory or by any isolated system… We must, first, purify our atmosphere and make a complete transformation of our environment, for it corrupts our instincts and our will by constricting our hearts and our minds."[4]

From its earliest articulations, revolutionary anarchism was not only anticapitalist, but also anti-imperialist and anticolonialist.[5]

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[1] Translated from a 1915 Hindustan Ghadar Party leaflet, T.R. Sareen, *Select Documents on the Ghadr Party* (New Delhi: Mounto, 1994), 174.

[2] Partha Chatterjee, *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 52.

[3] Sam Dolgoff, ed., *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 66.

[4] Dolgoff, 68.

[5] Dolgoff, *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*; Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, *Black Flame: the Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009); Michael Schmidt, *Cartography of Revolutionary Anarchism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2013).

The same cannot be said of traditional Marxism. In the *Communist Manifesto*, which introduced Marxism to the world, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels dismissed the colonial world as the "barbarian and semi-barbarian countries."[6] Marx and Engels praised bourgeois imperialism for bringing civilization to the world by making "barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West."[7] Because of Western imperialism and colonialism, wrote Marx and Engels, the bourgeoisie has "rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life."[8]

In traditional Marxist "stages of history" ideology, capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism played an important role. The bourgeoisie was the revolutionary class that destroyed the decaying feudal world and ushered in the modern, bourgeois capitalist world. In the next stage, the proletariat was the revolutionary class, which would eventually destroy the bourgeois order to replace it with socialism, which would after a time lead to the highest stage of socialism; communism. Much of the nonbourgeois world, however, was not yet proletarianized. Peasants and "barbarians" were not yet part of history. They existed outside of history, or worse, futilely worked against the unfolding of history. Peasants, according to the *Manifesto,* were "not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay, more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history."[9] In order to become part of history, to join those who would make up the revolutionary class, they would first have to be brought up to speed through the process of proletarianization; that is to say, they needed to be transformed by modern industrial capitalist discipline. Capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism, then, were the systems that would assimilate and discipline these supposedly backward people and prepare them to join the ranks of the industrial proletariat.

This explains Engels's racist, imperialistic article "Democratic Pan-Slavism" published in his and Marx's paper *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in February 1849. "Democratic Pan-Slavism" was a direct reply to the anti-imperialist and pro-peasant assertions of Bakunin's *Appeal to the Slavs.* Engels scoffed at Bakunin's talk of justice, humanity, equality, and independence as naïve and sentimental rubbish. He explained that German imperialism was "in the interests of civilization."[10] Without German conquest, argued Engels, the Slavs would be nothing. "The Austrian Slavs," for example, "have never had a history of their own" and "they are dependent on the Germans and Magyars for their history, literature, politics, commerce and industry…"[11] As for Bakunin's denunciation of imperialist violence, Engels replied that such coercion is also necessary to civilization; for "nothing is accomplished in history without force and pitiless ruthlessness, and what indeed would have happened to history if Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon had had the same quality of compassion now appealed to by [Bakunin and his ilk]."[12] In this Engels exhibited that in its earliest articulations, Marxism took for granted an imperialist, Western civilizationist worldview; that is to say, the worldview of the white colonizer.

This unpleasant fact becomes even more apparent in light of Engels's understanding of the United States' conquest of Mexico: "And will Bakunin reproach the Americans with this 'war of conquest', which admittedly gives a hard knock to his theory based on 'justice and humanity', but

[6] Frederic L. Bender, ed., *Karl Marx: The Communist Manifesto* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 59.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Bender, 64.
[10] David Fernbach, ed., *Karl Marx: The Revolutions of 1848* (New York: Random House, 1973), 234.
[11] Fernbach, 236–237.
[12] Fernbach, 236.

which was waged simply and solely in the interests of civilization?" For Engels, it was a given that the US conquest of Mexico was part of the march of progress. Thanks to US imperialism, wrote Engels, "magnificent California was snatched from the lazy Mexicans, who did not know what to do with it."[13] The "energetic Yankees," he continued, are "opening the Pacific for the first time to actual civilization…"[14] According to Engels, Bakunin's silly notions of independence and justice were irrelevant in the grand scheme of things: "The 'independence' of a few Spanish Californians and Texans [Mexicans] may suffer by this, 'justice' and other moral principles may be infringed here and there; but what does that matter against such world-historical events?"[15] For Marx and Engels, Western imperialism was necessary to spread capitalism. Capitalism was necessary to set the stage for socialist revolution. Hence, English colonialism in Asia was necessary for humankind to "fulfill its destiny."[16] Likewise, French conquest of Algeria was a "fortunate fact for the progress of civilization."[17]

Over the following decades, Bakunin became a harsh critic of what he saw as Marxist authoritarianism. He rejected Marx's "stages of history" and the idea that the masses had to be disciplined by capitalism before they were ready for socialism. He despised the contemptuous way that Marx talked about the peasantry and the "lumpenproletariat." Rather than being inherently counter-revolutionary, these classes of people carried the greatest revolutionary potential by virtue of their numbers, their oppressed positionalities, and by the fact that they were still undisciplined by capitalism and the state. They were "the flower of the proletariat."[18] By this phrase, wrote Bakunin,

> "I mean precisely that eternal 'meat' for governments, that great *rabble of the people* ordinarily designated by Messrs. Marx and Engels by the phrase at once picturesque and contemptuous of 'lumpenproletariat', the 'riff-raff', that rabble which, being very nearly unpolluted by all bourgeois civilization carries in its heart, in its aspirations, in all necessities and miseries of its collective position, all the germs of the Socialism of the future, and which alone is powerful enough today to inaugurate the Social Revolution and bring it to triumph."[19]

In light of the stark differences between these two competing visions for socialist revolution, that of Bakunin on one hand and that of Marx and Engels on the other, it is no mystery why in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century up until Lenin, anarchism, not Marxism, was the dominant force in the global radical revolutionary and anticolonial Left. Benedict Anderson writes of this time period that "anarchism, in its characteristically variegated forms, was the dominant element in the self-consciously internationalist radical Left."[20] He offers that the reason for this is that unlike Marxism, the anarchist movement "did not disdain peasants and agricultural la-

[13] Fernbach, 230.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Quoted in Schmidt and van der Walt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, 311.

[17] Quoted in Ibid.

[18] Michael Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom & the State* (London: Freedom Press, 1990), 48.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (New York: Verso, 2005), 2.

borers in an age when serious industrial proletariats were mainly confined to Northern Europe."[21] Further, anarchism "had no theoretical prejudices against 'small' and 'ahistorical' nationalisms, including those in the colonial world."[22] Finally, writes Anderson, because of their belief in the immediate revolutionary potential of peasants and anticolonial movements:

Anarchists were also quicker to capitalize on the vast transoceanic migrations of the era. Malatesta [a major Italian anarchist theorist/organizer] spent four years in Buenos Aires – something inconceivable for Marx or Engels, who never left Western Europe. Mayday celebrates the memory of immigrant anarchists – not Marxists – executed in the United States in 1887.[23]

Michael Schmidt similarly asserts that "It is because of this very early and radical challenge to colonialism and imperialism…that the anarchist movement penetrated parts of the world that Marxism did not reach until the 1920s."[24]

Anarchism played a significant role in the larger world of transnational, anticolonial, anticapitalist struggle in the era. Despite this, until recent years, the vast majority of the Anglophone historiography of anarchism has focused primarily on personalities and organizations in Europe and Anglo-America. Michael Schmidt recognizes some of the major gaps in the historiography:

> "A far more important omission is the massive Latin anarchist and anarcho- and revolutionary syndicalist movements, which dominated the organized working classes of Cuba, Mexico, Brazil, Portugal, Argentina, and Uruguay… Also excluded are the powerful East Asian anarchist currents. Lastly, there was the key role played by anarchist militants in establishing the first trade unions and articulating the early revolutionary socialist discourse in North and Southern Africa, the Caribbean and Central America, Australasia, South-East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East."[25]

The Ghadar Party alone, which is the most prominent example of South Asian anarchism, "built a world spanning movement that," writes Schmidt, "not only established roots on the Indian subcontinent in Hindustan and Punjab, but which linked radicals within the Indian Diaspora as far afield as Afghanistan, British East Africa (Uganda and Kenya), British Guiana (Guiana), Burma, Canada, China, Fiji, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaya (Malaysia), Mesopotamia (Iraq), Panama, the Philippines, Siam (Thailand), Singapore, South Africa, and the USA…"[26] Historian Maia Ramnath has shown that even some of the more iconic figures of Indian independence were influenced by anarchism. Bhagat Singh, for example, read Kropotkin, hung a portrait of Bakunin up in the Naujavan Bharat Sabha headquarters in Lahore, and wrote a series of articles on anarchism for a radical Punjabi monthly.[27]

However, rather than labeling these Indian anti-authoritarians as capital-A Anarchists, Ramnath sees these South Asian radical tendencies as part of a larger intersection of global– antiauthoritarian/anticapitalist/anticolonial/anti-imperialist–radicalism of which anarchism is one component. This way of looking at it is what Ramnath calls "decolonizing anarchism."[28] One way

[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Schmidt, *Cartography of Revolutionary Anarchism*, 9.
[25] Schmidt, 20.
[26] Schmidt, 20–21.
[27] Maia Ramnath, *Decolonizing Anarchism: An Antiauthoritarian History of India's Liberation Struggle* (Oakland: AK Press/Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2011), 145.
[28] ibid.

that Ramnath exemplifies this is in her approach to subaltern studies. Beginning about a century after the death of Marx, Ranajit Guha and a handful of other South Asian scholars launched a Bakuninesque attack on both bourgeois nationalist and Marxist historiographies of South Asia. It would be easy for Western antiauthoritarians to place the subaltern school under the umbrella of anarchism, but Ramnath does vice versa. Rather than try to fit subaltern studies into an anarchist framework, she takes the decolonized approach of placing anarchism within a subaltern studies framework.

In other words, instead of using anarchism to explain subaltern studies, she uses subaltern studies to explain anarchism. In the first chapter of *Decolonizing Anarchism*, when Ramnath sets out to define anarchism, she turns to Partha Chatterjee's chapter "The Thematic and the Problematic" in his book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Chatterjee formulates two parts of a social ideology; the thematic, which "refers to an epistemological as well as ethical system which provides a framework of elements and rules for establishing relationships between elements," and the problematic, which "consists of concrete statements about possibilities justified by reference to the thematic."[29] In the problematic is an ideology's "identification of historical possibilities and the practical or programmatic forms of its realization," and in the thematic

> "its justificatory structures, i.e. the nature of the evidence it presents in support of its claims, the rules of inference it relies on to logically relate a statement of the evidence to a structure of arguments, the set of epistemological principles it uses to demonstrate the existence of its claims as historical possibilities, and finally, the set of ethical principles it appeals to in order to assert that those claims are morally justified."[30]

"The anarchist tradition," writes Ramnath, "is a discursive field in which the boundaries are defined by a thematic, not a problematic," which is to say that anarchism "is a thematic larger than any of its myriad manifestations, all of which can be considered anarchism if they refer to that thematic – if they are part of the anarchist conversation."[31] She continues, "This is also analogous to contrasting *language* as [quoting Chatterjee] 'a language system shared by a given community of speakers' – that is anarchists – with *parole*, 'a concrete speech act of individual speakers' – that is, what's said or done by any type of anarchist."[32] The thematic that defines anarchism's boundaries, says Ramnath, "is the quest for collective liberation in its most meaningful sense, by maximizing the conditions for autonomy and egalitarian social relationships, sustainable production and reproduction."[33]

It is appropriate that Ramnath turns to a subaltern studies theorist for a framework to define the boundaries of anarchism. Early subaltern studies in particular shares much common ground, though not consciously so, with the early anarchist theorists. Ranajit Guha's notion of subaltern consciousness, for example, is strikingly similar to Bakunin's notion of peasant consciousness. In one of the formative works of the subaltern school–*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*–Ranajit Guha wrote, "To acknowledge the peasant as the maker of his own rebel-

[29] Chatterjee, *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, 38.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ramnath, 36.
[32] Ibid., 36–37; Chatterjee, *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, 39.
[33] Ramnath, 37.

lion is to attribute, as we have done in this work, a consciousness to him."[34] That consciousness is encapsulated by the word "insurgency." Insurgency is, said Guha, "the name of that consciousness which informs the activity of the rural masses known as jacquerie, revolt, uprising, etc. or to use their Indian designations – dhing, bidroha, ulgulan, hool, *fituri* and so on."[35] Compare this to Bakunin's notion of peasant consciousness. Bakunin asked, for the masses (Guha's subaltern classes), "of what does political consciousness consist?" to which he answered, "It can be assured by only one thing – the goddess of revolt."[36]

Both Guha and Bakunin rejected the Marxist notion of what Hobsbawm called "pre-political people."[37] Engels described peasant Slavs as not having a history of their own independent of what their imperialist masters imposed on them. Hobsbawm, writing in the Marxist tradition, asserted that "traditional forms of peasant discontent" were "virtually devoid of any explicit ideology, organization, or programme."[38] Marxists and bourgeois nationalists both saw peasant insurgency as a spontaneous, disorganized, random lashing out of the pre-political and unconscious masses. In *Elementary Aspects*, Guha showed that peasant insurgency was indeed the expression of peasant consciousness and organization, and that peasant insurgents in India–rather than randomly lashing out–were discriminating in their targets for destruction or inversion. Bakunin likewise noted discrimination of targets, and hence consciousness, in peasant uprisings in Europe. "The Calabrian peasants" for example, wrote Bakunin, "began by looting the castles [estates] and the city mansions of the wealthy bourgeois, but took nothing from the people."[39]

For Guha, "There was nothing in the militant movements of [India's] rural masses that was not political. This could hardly have been otherwise under the conditions in which they worked, lived and conceptualized the world."[40] The material conditions, exploitation, and relationships of stark inequality imposed on them by a variety of forms of authority gave peasants almost no choice but to be politically conscious for the sake of their own survival and dignity. Likewise, Bakunin wrote, "The peasants are made revolutionary by necessity, by the intolerable realities of their lives."[41] Authoritarian impositions, said Guha, led peasants to develop a negative consciousness. That is to say, "His identity amounted to the sum of his subalternity. In other words, he learnt to recognize himself not by the properties and attributes of his own social being but by a diminution, if not negation, of those of his superiors."[42] Because of this negative consciousness, insurgency often assumed the form of destruction and inversion of the symbols of authority. Bakunin recognized this same kind of negative consciousness of the peasantry, and he trusted and encouraged it as a progressive force. In one of his most misunderstood, misused, and most quoted lines, Bakunin wrote: "Let us therefore trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternal source of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!"[43]

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[34] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 4.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Dolgoff, 308.

[37] Quoted in Guha, 5.

[38] Quoted in Ibid.

[39] Guha, 191.

[40] Guha 6.

[41] Dolgoff, 191.

[42] Guha, 18.

[43] Dolgoff, 57.

Guha and Bakunin both saw the inability to acknowledge peasant consciousness as, in Guha's words, "elitist as well as erroneous."[44] Marxist interpretations, Guha continues, have been able to recognize as real and worthwhile only those movements that conform to Marxist theory, or that give the credit to Marxist organizations: "…they err who fail to recognize the trace of consciousness in the apparently unstructured movements of the masses."[45] Bakunin called for Marxists, and the urban workers Marxists claimed to represent, to "abandon their contemptuous attitude…City workers must overcome their anti-peasant prejudices not only in the interests of the Revolution, or for strategic reasons, but as an act of elementary justice."[46] If Marxists were to fail to do this, warned Bakunin, then Marx's claim that peasants are counter-revolutionary would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The ruling class, Bakunin explained, have already come to recognize peasant consciousness, and they have learned how to manipulate it to their own ends. If Marxists continue down the path of contempt for the rural masses, it will be to the detriment of all.

These kinds of critiques, shared by anarchists and subalternists, go a long way in explaining why anarchism rather than Marxism, was so influential in the global radical anticolonialist movement in the early twentieth century. The anarchist movement in the era facilitated a transnational anticolonial network, and Indian radicals were very much a part of creating that network. Perhaps the most widely read book that deals with this network is Benedict Anderson's *Under Three Flags*. As insightful as Anderson's book is, it only gives a picture of a slice of that transnational network. He seems to willfully leave out the United States from the story, and as a result, much is missing, as cities such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco were vitally important points in that network. The anarcho-syndicalist IWW alone, founded in Chicago in 1905, connected radical antiauthoritarians on every continent.

Har Dayal, founder of the Ghadar party, was active in the IWW before founding Ghadar. Near Oakland, California he founded a training school for anarchist propagandists that he named "the Bakunin Institute." Not only did the U.S. act as a base for US-Indian radical solidarity, but also it facilitated a type of South-South solidarity as well; for example, in the U.S., the Ghadar Party and the Mexican anarchist PLM movement worked together against their common enemies of capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism.[47]

While in U.S., Indian antiauthoritarian radicals developed a uniquely South Asian anarchism that drew on South Asian cultures and traditions as much as it did on Western anarchism. In other words, instead of remaking themselves in anarchism's image, they remade anarchism in their own image, using anarchism to serve their own anticolonialist ends rather than using their anticolonialism for anarchist ends. They gravitated to anarchism because it was the clearest articulation of their ideas in terms of tactics, theory, and vision for the future; it was fluid enough to accommodate wide diversity (which was highly necessary for any movement attempting to be effective in South Asia), and more than any other movement available to them at the time, it connected them to like-minded radicals around the world facilitating transnational radical solidarity.

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[44] Guha, 4.

[45] Guha, 5.

[46] Dolgoff, 201.

[47] Emily C. Brown, *Har Dayal: Hindu Revolutionary and Rationalist* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975), 116; Chaz Bufe and Mitchell Verter, eds., *Dreams of Freedom: A Ricardo Flores Magon Reader* (Oakland: AK Press, 2005).

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