

Book review of Black Flame by Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt

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This is a remarkable book, a wonderful book. I wish I had had it years ago when I was developing my politics. Everyone interested in anarchism should read this book. Although not without some quirky judgments, it is clearly committed to anarchism and is carefully and deeply based on scholarly research. It is not a history of anarchism (apparently that will be volume 2), but a thematic discussion of various aspects (although frequently going into the historical background of the topic under discussion).

Instead of the usual Eurocentric presentation, Schmidt and van der Walt place the movement in a world context. Of course the authors know that the anarchist movement began in Europe. Capitalism and the industrial revolution began in Europe and so did the ideological reactions to it: modern democracy, liberalism, socialism (of all varieties), nationalism, internationalism, etc. These ideologies spread around the globe, interacting with and merging with local cultures and struggles. When discussing an aspect of anarchism, the authors may cite examples from France or the USA, but are as likely to give examples from Japan, China, Argentina, or South Africa.

Rather than treating anarchism as a set of great ideas developed by a series of wise sages, the authors regard it as essentially a movement. Rooted in the mass struggles of workers, as well as peasants, along with all the oppressed, the great ideas of anarchism came out of this movement. Even at times when the popular movement dies down and only a small number of revolutionaries hold to the ideal, anarchist ideas are still directed toward the next upswing of mass struggle. While there were libertarian precursors, the anarchist movement, as a movement, began in the 1860s, under the initiative of Michael Bakunin and his companions in the First International, in conflict with Karl Marx. The ideas were developed further by Peter Kropotkin and others, and incorporated into the syndicalist movement (radical, libertarian-democratic, unionism). They call this “*the broad anarchist tradition*.”

To them, this is anarchism. “‘*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). Even Proudhon does not make the cut. The first to call himself an anarchist, he advocated a reformist program, a market economy, and was against unions and strikes, besides being misogynist. However, they freely admit that Proudhon influenced Bakunin and other anarchists. Nor are they factually wrong, in that, as a movement, anarchism did begin with Bakunin (against the opposition of most Proudhonians). Similarly, they deny that the individualists such as Benjamin Tucker were anarchists, and the same for anyone else who was not pro-working class, revolutionary, and libertarian socialist or communist.

As a matter of historical judgment, I find this a bit quirky, but not terribly wrong. Whether we should call Proudhon a libertarian who influenced Bakunin’s anarchism or say he was an early anarchist is not a big deal. The problem is its current application. A very large proportion of people who sincerely call themselves anarchists today are not for working class revolution. These radicals desire an end to the state, capitalism, and all oppressions—that is, they share the goals of the broad anarchist tradition (unlike, say, so-called pro-capitalist “libertarians”). They seek to achieve this by gradual, nonviolent, steps, living in nonconformist styles, and building alternate institutions. These will, they think, eventually replace the capitalist economy and state.

I have no problem saying that they are outside the broad anarchist tradition of revolutionary, working class, anarchist-communism. They are. But, it seems to me to be pointless to declare that they are not anarchists. This would involve us in a terminological dispute which makes us look sectarian. It is more useful, I think, to argue that such reformists are programmatically wrong and will not achieve the goals they share with revolutionary anarchism

Disputes Among Anarchists and Syndicalists

The authors focus on disputes within the broad anarchist tradition. Covering such disputes, they try to give a fair account of each side in each disagreement but conclude with their own opinion. They are almost always correct in their judgments—which is to say, I agree with them. They begin with the dispute between “insurrectionist anarchism” and “mass anarchism” (I prefer “mass struggle anarchism”). The question is whether individuals or small groups should refuse to “wait” for mass struggles and should engage in “propaganda by the deed” to hopefully inspire the people to rise up. Or whether anarchists should participate in the lives and struggles of workers and others, to build mass movements and organizations, which may eventually erupt in mass uprisings (popular insurrections) This is the approach they recommend. They note that insurrectionism has a long history in anarchism, but overall has been a minority tendency.

From Bakunin on, the revolutionary anarchists have aimed for a mass working class base in the radical union movement of syndicalism. Within syndicalism, there have been a variety of political orientations, including those who were explicitly anarchist (anarcho-syndicalism) and those who were not explicitly anarchist (revolutionary syndicalism) and even some who were explicitly Marxist and anti-anarchist (Daniel De Leon). The last two types contributed to the overall syndicalist movement and therefore the authors regard them as part of the broad anarchist tradition. (Including explicit Marxists who denounced anarchism, such as the authoritarian and sectarian De Leon, as part of the anarchist tradition also seems quirky to me, although the key point is correct: they contributed to the broader syndicalist movement.)

They review disputes among anarchist syndicalists as to whether to work inside existing (bureaucratic-conservative) unions, whether to create only revolutionary unions, or whether to only build rank-and-file groupings outside the union structures. Other union issues are covered. They conclude, “*A tactic cannot be made into a principle; different conditions merit different tactics*” (p. 233). This is an eminently sensible approach.

Another issue is whether anarchists should take a dual-organizational strategy, that is, build organizations of anarchists around common programs while working in broader organizations and movements, such as unions and community organizations. This is opposed to the anti-organizationalist approach of those who only want local groups in loose networks or those syndicalists who only sought to build unions. They review the controversies around the dual-organizationalist Platform. They claim that the idea of a specifically anarchist organization goes back to Bakunin and is not a new concept.

They discuss the relationship of working class anarchism and syndicalism to non-class issues (which overlap with class). This includes a review of the way in which syndicalists have worked to build community-based struggles around housing and culture. That is part of the overall approach of building counterculture and counterpower institutions to oppose capitalism, preparatory to revolution. (This is what Gramsci called the struggle over “hegemony”). They discuss the class struggle of peasants. While not as frequently anarchist as workers’ struggles, peasants have turned to anarchism in several heroic rebellions. In relation to women’s liberation, anarchists have, they point out, historically excellent theoretical positions. But their practice has often fallen sadly short of what it should be—although there are significant examples of anarchist women’s struggles.

Attitudes toward oppressed nations and races are highly conflicted among anarchists. All anarchists are against imperialism, national oppression, and white supremacy. But many anarchists

oppose national liberation as a concept, on the grounds that it leads to new states and new ruling classes—as nationalists advocate but which anarchists are rightly opposed to. After reviewing the various opinions, Schmidt and van der Walt conclude that anarchists should “...*participate in national liberation struggles in order to shape them, win the battle of ideas, [and] displace nationalism with a politics of national liberation through class struggle...*” (p. 310). They cite the many cases where anarchists have participated in wars of national liberation, from Makhno’s Ukraine to Korea and elsewhere.

Anarchists’ View of Marxism

Although an anarchist, I been deeply influenced by Marxism, both libertarian-autonomist Marxism and dissident Trotskyism. So I was interested in how they discussed the interaction between anarchism and Marxism. Fundamentally they get it right. They acknowledge that both anarchism and Marxism come out of the same working class, socialist, movement. Both trends have the goals of a stateless, classless, society without oppression, to be achieved by international revolution of the working class and other oppressed people. From Bakunin onwards, many anarchists have valued Marx’s economics and his broader historical materialism. As mentioned, the authors recognize that some Marxists made contributions to syndicalism. They also note that there has been an antistatist minority trend within Marxism which has been neither Leninist nor social democratic. It has interpreted Marxism as almost the same as class-struggle anarchism. They cite the council communists, but could have also cited William Morris, the Johnson-Forest Tendency, and more recent autonomous Marxists. So it is possible to hold at least some of Marx’s views and still have an antiauthoritarian politics

They also raise the anarchist criticisms of Marxism. They refer to Marx’s determinism, which has often been interpreted in a mechanical way. Marx was a centralist, as opposed to anarchism’s decentralized federalism. While both Marx and Bakunin advocated unions (unlike Proudhon), Marx subordinated them to building working class political parties to run in elections, contrary to anarchism’s anti-electoralism. (This was the main practical issue in dispute between Marx and Bakunin in the First International; surely the verdict of history is on the side of the anarchists.) Marx advocated a transitional state after the revolution. While a small minority of Marxists have been libertarian, the mainstream of Marxism has been overwhelmingly either pro-imperialist social democratic or Marxist-Leninist totalitarian. Whatever its virtues, this is what Marxism, in the main, led to. So, Marxism has useful aspects for anarchists but is not something to be simply integrated with anarchism. “*There are ambiguities and contradictions in Marx’s thought, which can be interpreted as ‘two Marxisms’...*” (p. 93).

However, in a number of topics the authors make mistakes about Marxism, a subject which they do not know as well as they know anarchism (but few Marxists know much about anarchism!). For example, Marx did not think that commodity prices were directly due to the labor-time invested in the commodity (its value). He thought that the relation between labor-time values and prices was indirect and complicated (what has been called the “transformation problem”; Mattick, 1969). Marx did not believe in a specific “*strategy of the dictatorship of the proletariat*” (p. 99) to create a state ruled by a centralized party. To Marx, the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (writing in a time when “dictatorship” had a different meaning than today) meant neither more nor less than the rule of the working class as a class, such as in the radically-democratic Paris

Commune (Draper, 1987; Price, 2007). There are other issues where their discussion is less than fully accurate (as when considering Marx's views on the peasants; Draper, 1978).

One problem with the authors understanding of Marx is that they tend to merge together the views of Marx, Kautsky, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, into one ideology, called "classical Marxism." However the continuity between Marx's Marxism and Mao's Marxism, while real, is limited and distorted. Despite his defects, Marx did not at all aim for the murderous totalitarian state capitalism of Soviet Russia or Communist China. But, to repeat, overall the authors have a correct appreciation of the relation of Marxism to anarchism.

The lack of a background in Marxism does become a problem in various ways. For example, when discussing the differences between insurrectionalist anarchism and mass anarchism, they state that insurrectionalism is "impossibilist," meaning that it regards the struggle for reforms as futile. But, they say, mass anarchism is "*possibilist, believing that it is both possible and desirable to force concessions from the ruling classes*" (p. 124). This prepares the way for a social revolution.

This is a valuable point, but it leaves something out. We are now in the epoch of imperialism and capitalist decline. The tendency of the falling rate of profit and the trend toward monopoly have caused a trend toward stagnation, which capital has fought by expanding fictitious profits, looting the environment, and attacking the working class. This has been apparent again since about 1970, with the end of the post-World War II apparent prosperity, and is now clearer than ever. Reforms and concessions can still be forced from the ruling class, yes, but it is becoming harder and harder over time, as the crisis deepens. Mass struggle anarchists must participate with the workers in fighting for even the most limited of benefits. But we should also warn them that attacks will worsen and that a revolution is needed if we are to avoid a new Great Depression, fascism, nuclear war, and ecological catastrophe. In the current period, we are possibilist in only a limited sense.

I have touched on only some of the topics raised by the authors. Overall this book is a brilliant and complex discussion of what class-struggle revolutionary anarchism—the broad anarchist tradition—really is and what it may yet become. I look forward to volume 2.

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