

Anarchists, Maoists, and Anti-Imperialism

Gabriel Kuhn & Luther Blissett

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Luther Blissett: When looking at liberation movements and struggles for social justice, especially non-pacifist, there seems to be an emphasis on the folks who clash physically, and often lose, with property and authority. This is discussed a bit in *Who's Afraid of the Black Blocs*. Is this an accurate, albeit short and generalising, representation? What are some of the other roles that are vital in supporting movements? How do you think movements can attract more members to these other roles?

Gabriel Kuhn: These are really big questions. I'll try to differentiate a bit. To begin with, we must not confound militant liberation struggles with street fighting tactics such as the black bloc. Black blocs are largely an urban First World phenomenon. They have their place under certain circumstances but the realities of militant masses in the Third World fighting both national and international oppressors is very different.

With respect to black blocs and militant resistance within First World autonomous movements, there have certainly been problems with fetishising the young, male street-fighter. There have also been problems with adventurism, irresponsibility, and a lack of both political and strategic vision. This does not discredit the tactic but it challenges us to reflect upon its use and improve it, mainly by tying it to broader social movements and other means of resistance in a collaborative effort that involves a bigger diversity of people.

Mass movements that employ militant means might have similar problems, but the variety of these movements is so big – from spontaneous popular uprisings to Maoist people's armies – that it would be utterly inappropriate to make any generalisations. Where these problems exist, they need to be addressed, but to decide on whether or how this has to happen is up to the people involved on the ground.

Which roles are vital to support movements? I won't gather points for originality here, but the answer is: any role that strengthens the research, analysis, propaganda, mobilisation, and confrontation that movements require. All kinds of people will be attracted to these roles as long as the struggle promises them a better life and they feel empowered rather than reduced to pawns in someone else's game.

Blissett: Since the election of Trump, have you seen or heard changes in attitudes in Sweden such as an increase in fascist attacks or activity?

Kuhn: I don't think that what has been dubbed "everyday Trumpism," that is, the emboldening of the far right to seize public space and harass and humiliate people, has significantly increased in Sweden or other European countries because of Trump winning the election. Hate crimes — in particular directed against migrants and refugees — have been up for a while and there has been a strong anti-feminist and anti-civil-rights backlash.

But Trump's victory certainly boosted these tendencies. One only needs to read the far-right's publications or related websites. Trump's victory is hailed as a confirmation that the chauvinistic politics of the far right indeed capture the will of the people. The US presidential elections have a huge impact the world over and in this case it has been particularly bad.

Blissett: Why do you think militants are drawn to Mao or Maoism?

Kuhn: In the 1960s and 1970s, Maoism seemed to be a bridge to world revolution as a Third Worldist adaptation of Marxism-Leninism. Radicals around the world rallied behind it. With the crisis that the Left has been experiencing since the end of the Cold War, the onset of neoliberalism, and the political and economic developments in China, the revolutionary hopes put in Maoism largely disappeared. In the First World, Maoism nearly went extinct.

In some Third World countries, however, among them Nepal, India, and the Philippines, fairly strong Maoist movements survived. The appeal of Maoism for Third World revolutionaries remains the application of Marxist-Leninist principles to the conditions of poor peasant societies. Today's resurgence of Maoism among First World radicals is, in my opinion, due to three reasons:

1. A fair number of First World radicals have grown tired of what J. Moufawad-Paul, in his book *The Communist Necessity*, has called "movementism" — the belief that as long as people are in some way politically active, revolutionary change will occur based on the convergence of their efforts. Many radicals have come to see this as a dead end and believe that common strategies and visions are required to help this process along. We could also call this a critique of 21st century anarchism in practice. Maoism provides a tighter analytical framework for political action and a clearer vision of revolutionary change.
2. Maoism still benefits from its image as an unorthodox and progressive variety of Marxism-Leninism, given its Third World appeal, the historical background of the Sino-Soviet split, the radicalness of the Cultural Revolution, and a certain affinity with post-colonial studies. Loosely speaking, it's more hip than tired old Leninist stuff.
3. Even when the Third World communist movement was in decline, there have been Maoist mass movements, posing a threat to the capitalist order and, in the case of Nepal, contributing to groundbreaking political changes (even if the subsequent actions of leading Nepali Maoists have been the subject of much criticism).

These are strong material manifestations of political engagement. In contrast, anarchism sometimes seems to have little more to offer than a few infoshops in gentrified neighbourhoods of First World cities. Needless to say, anarchism's influence goes further in many ways, but some radicals are attracted by the large-scale social changes that Maoism promises.

Blissett: What are some of the most important current theory-centered concerns or work for libertarian anti-imperialists for the next five or 10 years?

Kuhn: a) We have to find ways to combine national and international (or transnational) working-class struggles. Nationalism has been dividing the global working class

since about 200 years, creating various layers of workers, toiling and living under extremely different circumstances. It is one of the most effective means of “divide and conquer” ever conceived. Workers from one nation state see workers from another mainly as competitors, which is expressed in protectionism, anti-immigration sentiments, and plain racism and chauvinism.

The far right is exploiting these sentiments the world over. A truly internationalist working-class struggle means to identify the workers’ true enemies — the rich and powerful — and to formulate a common vision for achieving justice in global production and distribution. For workers in the First World – sometimes referred to as the “labour aristocracy” — this might imply the loss of some privileges that the imperialist order has bestowed upon them. Workers find it no easier to let go of privileges than anyone else. But no matter how difficult the challenge, it needs to be taken on if we want to get anywhere.

b) We need to slip libertarian convictions into this process without sliding into “movementism.” I consider an alliance of radicals with different ideological backgrounds mandatory if we want to play any role in current struggles.

One of the anarchists’ main tasks would be to keep the development of coercive power structures in check, which is a danger that is always looming. Anarchism has its shortcomings, and certainly not all the answers we need considering the complex societies we live in.

But it needs to be part of the revolutionary process in order to avoid pitfalls of the past. I don’t think it helps to throw hysterical fits whenever someone assumes “authority” or when a “hierarchy” is emerging, but someone has to make sure that no such structures consolidate, become a means in themselves, and form a new class of rulers.

Blissett: In terms of historical scholarship, where do you think the anarchist and anti-imperialist movements need more work?

Kuhn: To me, what seems most important is to analyse revolutionary change. How did it occur? What were the circumstances? How do they compare to the ones we are facing today? What happened afterwards? What went right? What went wrong? I think we have largely lost our grip on revolution. People still like to throw the word around to distinguish themselves from “reformists” or “liberals”, but very few can articulate what they actually mean by it. We have to rectify this, provide the term with meaning again, and pursue relevant politics.

Blissett: What is your current project that is closest to publication? Will you share some of the projects you currently have in the works?

Kuhn: I have just completed a German translation of Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s excellent book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. This is coming out soon. The next bigger project is another translation, this time into English. Kersplebedeb will publish an English edition of Torkil Lauesen’s *Det globale perspektiv*, which I am very excited about.

Torkil was a member of the so-called Blekingegade Gang, a group of Marxist revolutionaries in Denmark that committed various high-revenue robberies in the 1970s and 1980s and passed on all the proceeds to Third World liberation movements. I already collaborated with Torkil for the PM Press book *Turning Money Into Rebellion* and am looking forward to doing so again.

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