

Anarchists, Don't let the Left(overs) Ruin your Appetite

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Contents

Introduction 3
Anarchists and the International Labor Movement, Part I 3
Interlude: Anarchists in the Mexican and Russian Revolutions 4
Anarchists in the International Labor Movement, Part II 7
Spain 8
The Left 8
The '60s and '70s 9
Characteristics Vs. Definitions 11
Conclusions 12

Introduction

An uneasy relationship has existed between anarchists and leftists from the time Proudhon positively proclaimed himself an anarchist 150 years ago. From the 1860s through the 1930s most anarchists considered themselves to be an integral part of the international labor movement, even if there were moments of extreme conflict within it; leftist anarchists saw themselves as the radical conscience of the Left — the left of the Left, as it were. But since the death of 19th century anarchism on the barricades of Barcelona in May 1937, anarchists haven't had a movement to call their own. As a result, many anarchists trail after leftist projects, seemingly oblivious to the sometimes fatal historical rivalry that has existed between the two tendencies. They get seduced either by the seemingly antiauthoritarian characteristics of such groups (like decentralization), or by the use of some anarchic vocabulary (direct action for example).

The most notable recent example is the widespread uncritical anarchist support for and solidarity with the EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army). The name of the organization should be enough to cause anarchists to pause: national liberation has never been part of the anarchist agenda. The use of the Mexican flag at EZLN conventions makes it clear that the EZLN is a Mexican-identified movement, not an international one. Their calls for fair elections within the context of Mexican history is quite radical, but it remains a statist demand, and as such cannot be anarchist by any stretch of the imagination. The EZLN, for all its revolutionary posturing, is a broad-based democratic movement for progressive social change within the fabric of the Mexican state; it is leftist, liberal, social democratic, postmodern, courageous in the face of overwhelming odds and official repression... you name it, but it is not anarchist. The zapatistas don't refuse solidarity from anarchists, but to extrapolate from this fact that they themselves are anarchists — or even antiauthoritarians — is wishful thinking at best. Characteristics are not the same thing as definitions.

Anarchists and the International Labor Movement, Part I

The initial place where the rivalry between leftists and anarchists occurred was the First International (1864–76). Besides the well-known personal animosity between Marx and Bakunin, conflicts arose between the libertarian socialists and the authoritarian socialists over the ostensible goal of the International: how best to work for the emancipation of the working class. Using parliamentary procedures (voting for representatives) within a framework that accepted the existence of the state was the main tactic supported by the authoritarians. In the non-electoral arena, but remaining firmly within a statist agenda, was the demand of the right of workers to form legal trade unions. In contrast, direct action (any activity that takes place without

the permission, aid, or support of politicians or other elected officials) was promoted by the libertarians. Strikes and workplace occupations are the best examples of this method. The leftists preferred persuasion and the petitioning of the ruling class while the anarchists, recognizing the futility of this approach, preferred to take matters into their own hands: peacefully if possible, more insistently if necessary.

Another rift had to do with the issue of nationalism, which was a reflection of the tension between centralization and decentralization. For a majority of Internationalists, nationalism was seen as a progressive force because it led to the consolidation and further industrialization of natural resources and the means of production. This in turn created a larger proletariat, and a larger proletariat meant a better chance of successful revolution. Most anarchists correctly saw nationalism as a force opposed to federalism, a basic organizing method of libertarians. These and other irreconcilable conflicts between the two tendencies (such as the place of the individual in the class struggle) led to the decline of the International. This dissolution began in the wake of the Paris Commune in 1871; by the time Marx was able to relocate the General Council to New York in 1872 (far from the libertarian influence of the Spanish, French, and Italian sections), Bakunin and other leading anarchist activists had already been expelled from the organization. Individual anarchists were welcome to remain in the International, provided they dispensed with their antiauthoritarian principles. The First International became an anarchist-free zone for the last four years of its existence.

The social democrats (marxist or non-marxist, but always anti-revolutionary) who began the work of creating the Second International (1889–1914), already agreed (by the mere fact that most were members of legal socialist parties) that its methods were to be peaceful and lawful. They promoted universal male suffrage, with the program of getting their members elected to legislative bodies in order to enact pro-union laws, eventually legislating socialism into existence. Despite the total absence of any discussion of direct action, federalism, or revolution there were some anarchists (mostly syndicalists yearning for a big organization to join) who wanted to participate. They were rebuffed; the Second International was anarchist-free from the beginning.

Interlude: Anarchists in the Mexican and Russian Revolutions

The Mexican Revolution began in 1910, primarily as a middle-class rebellion against the corrupt and ultra-conservative *porfiriato* (the years of the rule of Porfirio Diaz). Anarchists were involved in the agitation to get rid of Diaz, most notably members of the PLM (Mexican Liberal Party), whose main theoretician was Ricardo Flores Magon. The PLM remained active throughout the revolutionary period. They tried to gain allies and supporters for radical land redistribution programs among the peasant armies of Villa and Zapata, and to a large degree were successful.

Another arena of anarchist agitation was the Casa Del Obrero Mundial (House of the World Worker) in Mexico City. The Casa was the place where anarcho-syndicalists, revolutionary unionists, and socialists congregated. Their focus was on legalizing unions and other aspects of industrial relations rather than on the agrarian question, even though the majority of Mexico's poor and working people were landless peasants. A majority of those involved in the Casa were adherents of a philosophical tendency that defined its members by the term *científicos* (more or less "scientists"): rational, urban, civilized. As such, they were appalled by the use of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the banners of the original zapatistas. In addition, their constant collaborations with authoritarian socialists seems to have weakened their adherence to libertarian principles; so much so that they became partners in the Red Battalions, which were organized by the center-left Constitutionalists to fight against the Zapatistas. This was the first (but unfortunately not the last) seriously embarrassing and shameful episode of anarchist history, when authoritarians took advantage of the gullibility of anarchists for their own benefit.

Rather than uniting with the radical peasants in the countryside around a truly revolutionary program of total expropriation of landed estates and industries (in keeping with their pronouncements), the syndicalists of the Casa preferred to make common cause with their anti-radical legalistic leftist rivals to kill and be killed by peasant revolutionaries. Later, as the result of a general strike in 1916, the Casa and all unions were outlawed, their more radical leaders were assassinated or imprisoned, and almost all urban revolutionary activity ceased. The new Constitutionalist rulers understood that anarcho-syndicalists, the erstwhile allies of progressive leftists, could not be mollified as easily with promises of legal status as the authoritarian socialists, and the leftists didn't seem to mind too much that their libertarian rivals were out of the picture.

The overthrow of the czarist regime in Russia in February 1917 was the defining moment of 20th century leftism. Suddenly political parties were decriminalized, political prisoners were amnestied, the death penalty was abolished. Revolutionary activity mushroomed, dominated by the Social Revolutionaries (SRs) in the countryside, the Bolsheviks (the left wing of the Russian Social Democratic Party) in the cities and the armed forces, and anarchists all over (their influence far out of proportion to their actual numbers). In the early months of the Russian Revolution, the SRs and the anarchists supported the slogan: "The land to the peasants; the factories to the workers"; the Bolsheviks were hesitant about the slogan as a program since they were the heirs of the more cautious notion that the masses still needed to be led by technocrats and other smart people like themselves. But as the momentum and enthusiasm of revolutionary self-activity continued (in the form of councils — *soviet* in Russian — and factory committees), Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership adopted the slogan as well. Another slogan soon appeared: "All power to the soviets."

Each of the slogans was interpreted differently by the different revolutionary tendencies. For anarchists and left SRs (the right SRs had previously split away from the revolutionary aspects of the SR program in favor of strictly parliamentary activity)

the slogan “The land to the peasants; the factories to the workers” meant just that: the peasants and workers would have total control over what was produced, how it would be produced, and how, when, and where it would be distributed. Federalism was the preferred method of organizing such a situation. For the Bolsheviks, however, such independent and decentralized self-activity was unthinkable; the State should decide how and when and where commodities were to be produced and distributed. Centralized planning was promoted as the only efficient and just way to control production and distribution. After the Bolshevik seizure of state power in October 1917, the approved revolutionary slogan became “All power to the soviets,” and that bothersome business about the land and the peasants and the factories and the workers was phased out.

Similarly there were unique interpretations of “All power to the soviets,” depending on party affiliation. To the Bolsheviks this was a call for a government of representatives from the soviets of workers, peasants, and soldiers with the addition of party members who, together, would implement and guide the dictatorship of the proletariat. To the left SRs and the anarchists, the slogan meant a federation of soviets and factory committees with or without delegates; for the anarchists this also meant no state at all.

The differences of interpretation turned into armed confrontations within six months of Bolshevik rule. The soviets began to be turned into organs that merely ratified Bolshevik executive decisions, while the more independent factory committees were abolished. Anarchists and left SRs who pointed out this anti-revolutionary tactic were arrested by the Cheka and were imprisoned — and sometimes executed — with counter-revolutionaries. In April 1918, the Cheka and regular police forces carried out simultaneous raids on anarchist centers in Petrograd and Moscow; the anarchists returned fire but eventually surrendered. The surviving arrested anarchists were deported the following year.

Meanwhile in the Ukraine from 1918–21, the Makhnovist Insurgent Army was creating liberated zones for workers and peasants by encouraging and facilitating the expropriation of landed estates and factories while carrying out a total war against the Whites (monarchist counter-revolutionaries), Ukrainian nationalists (republicans and socialists), and, on occasion, Trotsky’s Red Army. Twice there were formal treaties made between the Red Army and the Insurgent Army, and twice the Bolsheviks broke their agreements when it suited their military and state policy, arresting — but most often executing — the insurgent anarchists. For the Russian anarchists who supported the Makhnovists (there were many who didn’t, believing that a military structure was incompatible with true anarchist goals), this was the definitive end of their honeymoon with the Bolsheviks.

In the spring of 1921, the Bolsheviks faced the most serious threat to their retention of state power and their pretense of being the party of the proletariat. There was a rebellion at the island naval fortress of Kronstadt, just off the coast from Petrograd. The sailors, soldiers, and workers, frustrated with the intensely destructive policies of War Communism as well as the heavy-handed response of the Bolsheviks to a strike of

factory workers in Petrograd, began a protest movement against government injustice. Their demands included an end to forced grain requisitions in the countryside, abolition of the death penalty, freedom of speech and press for all socialist groups (including anarchists), and open (that is, not dominated by the Communist Party) elections in the soviets. Hardly any anarchists were involved in the rebellion (most had already been arrested or killed, and Kronstadt was a Bolshevik stronghold), but the complaints and demands of the Kronstadters fell in line with the anarchist critiques of the Soviet regime.

Lenin and Trotsky issued many misleading denunciations of the rebels, often resorting to outright fabrications in their characterizations of its leaders. They were afraid of the appeal (coming, as it did, from a bastion of approved revolutionary activity) such a call for a decentralized, directly democratic program would have on a population weary of War Communism (since the civil war had been officially over for several months) yet still committed to the revolutionary slogans of “All power to the soviets,” and “The land to the peasants; the factories to the workers.” The Bolsheviks, preferring the methods of statecraft over revolutionary solidarity and compromise, attacked the island and massacred the rebels who survived the military suppression. Even for the anarchists who were willing to excuse the excesses of authoritarianism in the Bolshevik government, this was too much. Many left Russia voluntarily at around the same time that the dissident anarchists were deported, ridding the Communist Party of its most radical opponents. The Soviet Union was subsequently unencumbered by the influence of anarchists.

Anarchists in the International Labor Movement, Part II

In the aftermath of the consolidation of Bolshevik rule in Russia, the Third — or Communist — International was formed in 1919. Non-Russian anarchists, excited about the real possibility of revolution spreading around the world in the wake of the Russian Revolution, initially tended to overlook the centralized and authoritarian nature of the organization (much as their Russian counterparts had overlooked the same aspects of the Bolshevik state for the early years of its existence). At the time of the first conference of the Comintern, the majority of Russian anarchists were either dead or in prison (despite Lenin’s assurances that there were no real anarchists in his jails — only criminals). Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, and anarcho-syndicalists from around the world who were attending lobbied the Soviet government to release these so-called criminals from jail; the Russians were quietly released and expelled. Members of the American IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) and the Spanish CNT (National Confederation of Labor) declined to affiliate to the Comintern.

Lenin's "Left-Wing Communism — An Infantile Disorder" was published in 1921, the same year of the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising, the final destruction of the Makhnovist Insurgent Army and the libertarian communes of the Ukraine, and the adoption of the neo-capitalist New Economic Policy. This screed was aimed primarily at council communists and other independent revolutionary socialists, but charges of "anarcho-syndicalist deviationism" were thrown at all of Lenin's opponents. All those not uncritically supportive of the policies of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and its methodology of democratic centralism were declared to be objectively counter-revolutionary. The attempt to keep the international labor movement subservient to the orders of the headquarters in Moscow, of which Lenin's tract was the most public aspect, was nearly totally successful. The strategy of socialism in one country was promulgated and with centralized hierarchical discipline in place, the Comintern could be used to further Soviet foreign policy goals.

Spain

The revolutionary response to the attempted military coup in Spain in July 1936 resulted in a protracted civil war between the defenders of the old monarchist order and the upholders of the five year old parliamentary democracy. Members of the large anarcho-syndicalist CNT were put in an awkward position: supporting one form of government over another. Some chose to pursue revolutionary goals rather than become government anarchists, but the majority went for collaboration with the forces of legalism — some even entering the government by becoming Cabinet Ministers.

By that time the Comintern had adopted the anti-revolutionary policy of the Popular Front, promoting parliamentary democracy in opposition to fascism through an alliance of republicans, middle-class progressives, social democrats, and Communists. This final abandonment of class struggle led directly to the May '37 Communist-dominated Popular Front's armed suppression of the CNT and the anti-stalinist POUM (Worker's Party of Marxist Unification), the two mass organizations in Spain at least nominally committed to some sort of revolution. The international labor movement was in the control of stalinists for the next decade.

The Left

The Left has consistently been identified with the international labor movement from the time of the First International; with the shift of focus from western Europe toward Russia beginning in 1917 and continuing into the 1960s, leftists have identified themselves in relation to events that occurred in the workers' paradise. Whether a leninist, trotskyist, stalinist, or non-leninist communist, each variety of leftist has a

particular view of when things went wrong (or not) with the Russian revolutionary experiment.

For anarchists who considered themselves part of the Left even after the debacles of the Internationals, this method of self-identification created a crisis: whether to make accommodations to the politics of leninism or to dispense with any and all hints of vanguardism. Most opted for the latter, but some (including the former Makhnovist Arshinov and Makhno himself) favored the militaristic vanguardism of the “Anarchist Platform.” Their more principled anarchist opponents called the Platformists “anarcho-bolsheviks,” for whom it was merely a case of the unchecked authoritarian behavior of the Bolsheviks that led them to abandon the true revolution; the necessary existence, goals, and methods of a self-conscious militarized revolutionary vanguard were accepted in full. Such an analysis dispensed with the idea of a mass-based self-organized revolution and substituted the armed action of a minority; this put the Platformists firmly within a tactical framework of leninism. This was not the first — or last — time that anarchists would flirt with the more authoritarian aspects of radical theory and practice. Many anarchists would disagree with this assessment of the Platform.

The main lesson of the anarchist presence in relation to the first two Internationals is that socialists prefer anarchists to be invisible and silent. That of the revolutionary experiences of Mexico, Russia, and Spain shows that for socialists, the only good anarchist is pro-government or dead. Loyally fighting for a Mexican Constitution didn’t slacken the resolve of Mexico’s rulers in outlawing and repressing anarcho-syndicalists who insisted on exercising their legal rights to organize radical trade unions. Helping to make revolutionary changes in cooperation with the Bolsheviks didn’t protect the anarchists from the wrath of Lenin and his cohorts when the anarchists insisted on remaining attached to libertarian principles and tactics. Neither did being part of a coalition of leftists and liberals in opposition to fascism shelter anarchists from the homicidal rivalry of stalinists and social democrats twenty years later.

The ’60s and ’70s

The social upheavals beginning in 1968 ended the near total eclipse of anarchism in the years following the Spanish experience. The formation of the New Left in the preceding few years, precipitated by examples of non-Soviet socialist alternatives (the Chinese, Cuban, Yugoslavian, Albanian, Korean, or Vietnamese models) resurrected an interest in unconventional and non-conformist aspects of political theory, which led to a renewed study of anarchist and non-leninist revolutionary history. Tactics of anarchist organizing were adopted by non-anarchists because of their assumed inherent anti-hierarchical nature (in keeping with egalitarian presumptions, as was the trend of those early days): consensus decision-making, affinity groups, rotating leadership or the lack of any and all formal leaders.

These outward forms (characteristics) of quasi-egalitarianism were usually accompanied by the celebration of various nationalist movements that had emerged in the context of global anti-colonial struggles, giving birth to an odd hybrid: pseudo-anarchic nationalist revolutionaries — activists who adopted the anarchist slogan “smash the state” while at the same time carrying the flag of the NLF (National Liberation Front, or “Viet Cong”), a stalinist popular front whose declared aim was the consolidation and centralization of the Vietnamese state. To anti-imperialists, some states are better than others, especially if they are in conflict with the United States. The problem, from an anarchist perspective, is that the goal of this strategy is to smash a particular state, not statism or government in general.

The response of '60s militants to legal repression and the rise of third worldism contributed to the disintegration of the New Left, which began in earnest when the revolutionary potential of the working classes in imperialist countries was played down and eventually dismissed. This theoretical innovation was accompanied by the rise of urban guerrilla groups; the military actions of an elitist anti-imperialist vanguard were substituted for the self-activity of “the masses,” especially the working masses. The exploits of these violent militants superficially hearkened back to the years of anarchist propaganda by the deed: bank robberies, bombings, assassinations. From the mid-1880s through the 1920s, some anarchists engaged in spectacular violent and illegal actions. The idea behind this unorganized but widespread strategy was to prod normally complacent workers into mass revolutionary activity by showing the vulnerability of bourgeois society and of individual political and economic leaders in particular. It didn't work, and was largely abandoned as counterproductive, but the popular association of anarchism with violence and mayhem was cemented.

The similar tactics of armed struggle groups and anarchists of the previous century led to the equation of the two tendencies in the analyses of many observers. As often as the media and various officials portrayed all violent political groups as “anarchist,” the groups themselves never tired of pointing out (to anyone who would listen) that they were not anarchists at all, but communists or socialists or progressives or nationalists or leftists.

Having the actions of urban guerrillas (fighting the imperialist state in solidarity with third world national liberationists) equated with those of armed anarchists (combating the state in solidarity with anyone — including themselves — who is oppressed by authoritarian social relations regardless of the political ideology of their rulers) must have been maddening to the leftists of the '70s. Their ideological forebears had been struggling for the previous 150 years to be rid of the stigma of anarchism, only to have it foisted on them again because of a similarity of tactics. But the leftists had only themselves to blame for this confusion since they had already appropriated an important term from the vocabulary of anarchism: direct action.

Characteristics Vs. Definitions

In the anarchist tradition the term direct action was never used as a euphemism for violence, unlike propaganda by the deed. It simply referred to any consciously political act that took place outside the realm of electoralism and other forms of statecraft: decision-making that uses mandated and revocable delegates instead of representatives, and creating mutual-aid networks instead of relying on welfare are two examples. In a general sense then, direct action refers to actions that encourage and expand the self-activity of any person or group without resorting to the institutions of the state. Polite or violent public protests, on the other hand, are undertaken in the hopes that policy makers can be influenced to implement legislative reform; this is the liberal (/conservative) or leftist (/rightist) strategy of appealing to political leaders' good will and/or fear. Since this strategy relies on the actions of people not directly involved, it has nothing to do with an anarchist understanding of direct action.

Registering public dissatisfaction with government policies (by marching, demonstrating, fighting cops, destroying property, expropriating banks, liberating prisoners, assassinating political/industrial leaders) is agitation and propaganda, not direct action. The effects of such activity on creating and sustaining anti-hierarchical communities beyond the clutches of politicians are extremely limited. It may make anarchism attractive to some people — which is exactly the point of propaganda (by the deed or idea) — but the point of direct action is to become accustomed to making decisions using anti-hierarchical methods, and then implementing positive egalitarian alternatives to statist ways of living. Unfortunately, most activist anarchists have adopted the leftist usage of direct action, meaning any angry confrontation with the state, rather than the traditional anarchist definition: ignoring the state.

This confusion is the result of substituting characteristics for definitions. Anarchism has a definition. It is a discrete political theory and practice; to be an anarchist means to be against all government. A social change movement might be decentralized, use some form of direct democracy (the mandated delegate model, for example), call for international solidarity, and use non-anarchist direct action (in the leftist sense of using limited violence or property destruction to further their programs), but these are characteristics of antiauthoritarian methods, not a definition of anarchism. If these tactics are used as part of a strategy for gaining legal recognition or influencing and/or implementing legislation, then those who use them cannot be anarchists; not because some self-appointed guardian of the ideology says so, but because anarchism is anti-legislative by definition. Anarchists are not frustrated liberals with an attitude, nor are they impatient authoritarian socialists unafraid to pick up a gun.

Conclusions

Maintaining a minority position of principled antiauthoritarianism within a larger authoritarian framework, as anarcho-leftists insist upon doing in relation to the Left, is naive at best. This brief historical survey has hopefully provided ample examples of the suicidal nature of such a project. Leftists want neither a loyal opposition nor a radical conscience, and they have made it abundantly clear over the last 150 years that they don't like anarchists and prefer not to have them around, cluttering up their moves for polite and safely legislated social change or sudden military *coups d'état*. Leftist anarchists consistently refuse to learn from the history of the interactions between their ideological predecessors and their desperately desired contemporary anti-anarchist allies. Involvement in non- (and anti-) anarchist fronts and alliances tends to make anarchists suspend the pursuit of their unique goals.

The conflicts that have existed between authoritarian socialists and anarchists have not gone away. Whether it's the tension between centralization and federalism, nationalism and internationalism, the role of the individual in relation to society and the state, or the more fundamental issue of statecraft (electoralism, agitating for legislative reform, etc) versus direct action, anarchists stand in opposition to the issues and programs of all kinds of leftists. The leftist agenda is predicated on the use of legislation, representative government and all of its coercive institutions, centralized economic planning by technocrats and other experts, and a commitment to hierarchical social relations.

Promoting self-activity, egalitarian interpersonal and social relations, and cultivating a critical perspective are among the best aspects of anarchism. As such, they are worth extending. Accepting spoon-fed solutions and programs, engaging in non-reciprocal solidarity with leftists, and other characteristics of ideological myopia need to be discarded. Anarchists, with their emphasis on the principles of mutual aid, voluntary cooperation, and direct action, cannot share a common agenda with contemporary leftists any more than they could 150 years ago.

A return to authentically anarchist principles, coupled with some understanding of the troubled history of the relationship between leftists and anarchists, can go a long way toward reinvigorating antiauthoritarian theory and practice. At the same time, moving beyond the melioristic beliefs (especially about western European technology, culture, and science) of 19th century anarchism, which have made the programs of anarchists and leftists seem similar, is crucial. The relevance of anarchist self-activity can only increase when the vestiges of authoritarian leftist assumptions and distortions are discarded from the words and behavior of antiauthoritarian activists, critics, and theorists.

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



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