

Insurrectional Anarchism vs. Class-Struggle Anarchism

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There has been a spurt of interest in a small radical book titled “The Coming Insurrection” (“TCI”), with authorship attributed to the “Invisible Committee” (IC). It was originally published in France in 2007. That country’s police cited it as evidence in a trial of “the Tarnaq 9,” radicals who were accused of planning sabotage. The French Interior Minister called it a “manual for terrorism” (quoted on p. 5). A U.S. edition got an unlikely boost by the far-right tv talk show clown Glen Beck. He has repeatedly identified it as a manual for a take-over of the U.S. by the left, by which he means everyone from the mildest liberal Democrats leftward. “This [is a] dangerous leftist book...You should read it to know what is coming and be ready when it does” (Beck, 2009). The interest of many on the left has been piqued; Michael Moore is reported to have read it.

From the perspective of revolutionary-libertarian socialism (class-struggle anarchism), I believe that many things are wrong with this pamphlet. But it is right on some very big things. That is a major part of its attraction, despite its opaque style (the authors have studied French radical philosophy and it shows). The IC members say that, on a world scale, our society is morally rotten and structurally in the deepest of crises. They denounce this society in every way and oppose all reformist programs for trying to improve it at the margins. They say that a total change is necessary and that this can only be achieved through some sort of revolution. Their goals are the right goals: a classless, stateless, ecologically-balanced, decentralized, and self-managed world. These views are well outside the usual range of acceptable political conversation. Unfortunately, I believe that the tactics and strategy which they propose are mistaken and unlikely to achieve their correct goals.

In “Black Flame,” Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt review the history of the mainstream of the anarchist movement-of what is often referred to as anarchist-communism. They describe two main strategies within the broad anarchist tradition. “The first strategy, insurrectionist anarchism, argues that reforms are illusory and organized mass movements are incompatible with anarchism, and emphasizes armed action-propaganda by the deed-against the ruling class and its institutions as the primary means of evoking a spontaneous revolutionary upsurge” (2009; p. 123). Historically a minority trend in anarchism, this is probably what most people think of as “anarchism.”

“The second strategy-what we refer to, for lack of a better term, as mass anarchism...stresses the view that only mass movement can create a revolutionary change in society, that such movements are typically built through struggles around immediate issues and reforms (...) and that anarchists must participate in such movements to radicalize and transform them into levers of revolutionary change” (same; p. 134). I prefer to call this second strategy by the more widely used term, “class-struggle anarchism.” (This is a discussion of broad political trends. Individual anarchists are not so sharply divided into “insurrectionists” or “class-struggle” types. Whatever their labels, their activities are likely to overlap with each other.)

Terms may be confusing. By “insurrection,” most people mean a revolutionary uprising by the mass of people to overturn the ruling class and smash its state. By this definition, it is the class-struggle anarchists who are working for an insurrection. On the other hand, the so-called insurrectionists are not clearly for an insurrection — a popular uprising — but are mainly interested in rebellious activities being carried out by themselves, a revolutionary minority. As we shall see, “TCT” is especially ambiguous about wanting a popular insurrection. However, I will stick with the usual political labels.

Actually the unnamed authors of this book do not explicitly identify with “anarchism,” which they mention negatively. They prefer the label of “communism.” Very likely they have been influenced by autonomous trends derived from Marxism, although they do not identify with “Marxism” either. I think that is safe to include them in the tradition of “insurrectionist anarchism.” Their advocacy of decentralization is typically anarchist rather than Marxist. In any case, by now there has been so much overlap and interaction between anarchism and libertarian trends in Marxism, that it is not possible (or relevant) to draw a sharp line between them.

Opposition to Working Class Organizations

According to “The Coming Insurrection,” the unions are the immediate enemy. “The first obstacle every social movement faces, long before the police proper, are the unions...” (p. 121). This view blurs distinctions among (1) the workers, who are misdirected by the unions but who get definite benefits from them; (2) the unions themselves as organizations which are created by the workers; and (3) the union officialdom, which is an agent of the capitalist class within the workers’ organizations. In other words, the workers and unions and bureaucrats are seen as one bloc, which is exactly how they are seen by the bureaucrats (and their reformist supporters).

Belonging to unions generally gives workers higher wages and better working conditions. This is something the Invisible Committee ignores and would not care about anyway. We might expect the IC to at least care that striking workers can shut down society as can no other section of society—but they do not care about this either. “...Strikes have usually traded the prospect of revolution for a return to normalcy” (p. 107). “Usually,” yes, except for the unusual times when strikes have been part of revolutions. Instead of organizing among workers, the IC advises its readers to find “hustles” and ways to scam the system outside of paid work. “The important thing is to cultivate and spread this necessary disposition towards fraud...” (p. 104).

At one point it was common on the far-left to deride the unions as solely agents of the capitalists. Supposedly the unions’ only function was to control the workers in the interests of the capitalist class. This view has been disproven by history. The bosses turn on the unions when times get tough — as they have since the end of the post-WWII boom (around 1970). The capitalists now oppose the power of unions, force

givebacks and cuts in contracts, and fight tooth and nail against the establishment of new unions. U.S. unions have gone from 33% of the private workforce to about 6%. Clearly, the capitalist class believes that — on balance — it is better for them to do without unions. The capitalists find the labor bureaucracy to be useful to them, but — on balance — the capitalists have concluded that unions bring more benefits to the workers than to the bourgeoisie. And they are right.

The IC's opposition to unions and, in fact, to the working class, is supported by a theory that there is no longer much of a working class. "...Workers have become superfluous. Gains in productivity, ...mechanization, automated and digital production have so progressed that they have almost reduced to zero the quantity of living labor necessary to the manufacture of any product..." (p. 46). This wild exaggeration leads to seeing work as mainly imposed by the capitalists in order to control the population, not primarily to exploit the workers and to accumulate surplus value.

Were this true, then we no longer live under capitalism. "...Capital had to sacrifice itself as a wage relation in order to impose itself as a social relation" (p. 91). In Marx's opinion, capitalism is nothing but the capital/labor relationship (the "wage relation"); therefore this would be the end of capitalism, while still some sort of new oppression. Without a capitalist class which buys the workers' labor power, there is no modern working class (no "proletariat"). Therefore, for "TCI" there is no longer a need to focus on working class struggles. (From my point of view, class struggles interact with nonclass struggles, such as over gender, race, nationality, age, etc.).

Can Reforms be Won, While Rejecting Reformism?

According to the "Black Flame" authors, "...insurrectionist anarchism is impossibilist, in that it views reforms, however won, as futile..." (Schmidt & van der Walt, 2009; p. 124). But class-struggle, mass, anarchists think that impossibilism means standing apart from the rest of working people. It means looking down on them for their desires for good jobs, decent incomes and housing, an end to racial or sexual discrimination, other democratic rights, ending wars, and safety from ecological catastrophe.

"The Coming Insurrection" expresses contempt for such, limited, reform struggles. Of struggles for jobs, it says, "Excuse us if we don't give a fuck" (p. 44). The danger of economic crisis and mass joblessness "...moves us about as much as a Latin mass" (p. 63).

They contemptuously reject those who warn of coming ecological and energy disasters. "...This whole 'catastrophe,' which they so noisily inform us about...may concern us, but it doesn't touch us" (pp. 73–74). "What makes the [ecological] crisis desirable is that in the crisis the environment ceases to be the environment" (p. 81). Desirable?

By contrast, "...mass anarchism is possibilist, believing that it is both possible and desirable to force concessions from the ruling classes..." (Schmidt & van der Walt, 2009; p. 124). We believe that reforms may be advocated as part of a revolutionary,

nonreformist, strategy. My one qualification of this view is that these limited gains can only be won for a brief period of time. The economy will get worse — and other disasters will increase, such as the spread of nuclear weapons and global warming. As a result, reforms become harder and harder to win, harder to carry out, and harder to continue under the counterattack from the right.

The issue is not whether some limited gains can be won for a time. They can, and the fight for them is necessary for building a revolutionary movement (as Schmidt and van der Walt write). But the issue is whether it is possible to win the kind of changes which are necessary to prevent eventual total disaster. It is not possible. (This important point is not made in “Black Flame.”)

Opposition to All Democratic Organizations

The Invisible Committee’s rejection of popular, mass, organization, is not limited to a rejection of unions. They say that they often “cross paths with organizations — political, labor, humanitarian, community associations, etc...” (p. 99) and find good people there. “But the promise of the encounter can only be realized outside the organization and, unavoidably, at odds with it” (p. 100).

Similarly, they call to “abolish general assemblies” (p. 121). There is a long history of popular insurrections which have created neighborhood assemblies, town councils, workplace committees, factory councils, soviets, shoras, and various forms of direct, face-to-face, forms of communal democracy. The IC members not only reject any form of delegated federation of such assemblies but the popular assemblies themselves.

A mass struggle requires decisions about mass actions. But the IC especially rejects the idea of democratic decision-making through discussion and voting. Instead they have a mystical fantasy of individuals pooling information and then “...the decision will occur to us rather than being made by us” (p. 124). Such a fantasy is authoritarian, highly likely to be hijacked by cliques and charismatic leaders.

We class-struggle anarchists usually make a distinction between two types of organization. There are the large, popular, organizations, such as unions, community groups, or (in revolutionary periods) workers’ and/or neighborhood assemblies. These are heterogeneous, composed of people with many opinions. Then there are the narrower, politically-revolutionary, type of organization, formed around a set of ideas and goals. These are formed by the minority of the population which has come to see the need for revolution and wishes to spread its ideas among the as-yet-unrevolutionary majority. They include both anarchist federations and Leninist parties — the anarchist groups are not “parties” because they do not aim to take power, either through elections or revolutions.

“The Coming Insurrection” rejects both mass and minority organizations. “Organizations are obstacles to organizing ourselves” (p. 15). It does not see the need for a

dual-organizational approach, because it does not see a problem in that only a minority is for revolution.

On the contrary, it insists, “Everyone agrees. It’s about to explode” (p. 9). “The feeling of imminent collapse is everywhere so strong these days...” (p. 105). Actually, everyone does not agree. Those who do are at least as likely to be for the far-right as for the far-left. Which is why Glen Beck promotes this book. However, in “TCI” there is no discussion of the dangers of the far-right, not to speak of out-and-out fascism. The closest it gets is “...we expect a surge of police work being done by the population itself — everything from snitching to occasional participation in citizens’ militias” (p. 115). But this is immediately followed by a discussion of police infiltration and provocation; the danger of attacks by armed right-wing “citizen militias” is dropped.

The crisis of our society will lead (is leading) to a decline in the moderate political middle and the growth of the extremes. In the U.S., conservative Republicans speak of the need for “Second Amendment remedies” if they cannot take power through elections. Posing as heirs to the U.S. Revolution, they speak of the possible need to violently overthrow bourgeois democracy, as the “founding fathers” overthrew the British monarchy.

To counter this, libertarian-socialist revolutionaries need to participate in large popular organizations such as unions and community groups. We need to organize ourselves, as part of the process of popular self-organization. Instead of mass, democratic, self-organization, “TCI” advocates “...a diffuse, effective, guerrilla war that restores us to our ungovernability, our primordial unruliness...This same lack of discipline figures so prominently among the recognized military virtues of resistance fighters” (pp. 110–111). The members of the Invisible Committee would do well to read accounts of Makhno’s anarchist guerrilla army in 1918 Ukraine, or Durruti’s anarchist militia column during the Spanish revolution, or any other account of guerilla warfare or underground resistance, before spreading such idiocy. There is no revolutionary process without democratic self-discipline and self-organization.

What Does the IC Think is to be Done?

As opposed to what it is against, what does “The Coming Insurrection” advocate positively? It rejects organization, but says, “We have to get organized” (p. 95). This will supposedly be done through “communes.” “Communes” are an expanded version of what has traditionally been called “affinity groups” or “collectives.” “Communes come into being when people find each other, get on with each other, and decide on a common path...” (p. 101). Communes will grow everywhere and take over everything. “In every factory, every street, every village, every school...a multiplicity of communes...will displace the institutions of society: family, school, union, sports club, etc.” (pp. 101–102). Communes will stay in touch with each other (I can hardly say “coordinate themselves”) by traveling members. To “TCI,” the revolution essentially is the spread and integra-

tion of communes. “An insurrectional surge may be nothing more than a multiplication of communes...” (p. 111).

The communes will do a number of things but central to the strategy is “sabotage.” This means “...maximum damage...breaking the machines or hindering their functions...The technical infrastructure of the metropolis is vulnerable...and these can be attacked...How can...an electrical network be rendered useless? How can one find the weak points in computer networks, or scramble radio waves and fill screens with white noise? ...A certain use of fire...’Fucking it all up’ will serve...” (pp. 111–112). Roads will be blocked. Food and medicine and other goods would cease to circulate. (As already mentioned, the Invisible Committee does not seem interested in the power of the working class to shut down the capitalist economy through mass strikes.)

If carried out, the widespread use of technical destruction, as advocated in “The Coming Insurrection,” would cause great suffering. This does not seem to bother “TCI.” If anything, this seems to be the goal. After insurrectionists bring down capitalist society through sabotage and chaos, it will be followed by “communism,” or so they think. “The interruption of the flow of commodities...liberate potentials for self-organization...” (p. 119). More likely, left-caused mass sabotage would result in wide-spread hatred of these “communists” who deliberately caused so much suffering. There would be a demand for a strong fascist state to provide “order.”

“Insurrection” without Revolution

While the French police have labelled the IC as “terrorists,” “TCI” does not advocate assassinating public officials nor exploding bombs in crowded places. Instead it advocates the destruction of property through wide-spread sabotage. But, if carried out, this would cause at least as much suffering — and possibly deaths — as any “terrorism.”

Their attitude toward violence is confusing. They declare, “There is no such thing as a peaceful insurrection. Weapons are necessary...” (p. 100). This is immediately followed by a call for rebels to have weapons — but not to use the weapons! “An insurrection is more about taking up arms and maintaining an ‘armed presence’ than it is about armed struggle” (same). In a revolutionary situation, they expect the army to be called out. Then the people could mingle with the army and win it over to the insurrection, without firing a shot! “Against the army, the only victory is political...A massive crowd would be needed to challenge the army, invading its ranks and fraternizing with the soliders” (pp.128 & 130). I do not dispute that the armed forces — sons and daughters of the working class — can and should be won over through “political” means. But there is likely to be a core of officers, “lifers,” and rightists who will need to be physically suppressed if they use force against the people.

Revolutionary class-struggle anarchists believe that the capitalist class must be overthrown and the state and other capitalist institutions need to be dismantled. They

need to be replaced with federated councils. The IC does not believe this. With all their talk of “insurrection,” their view is closer to the gradualist-reformist view of peacefully replacing capitalism and the state through alternative institutions. “...Wherever the economy is blocked...it is important to invest as little as possible in overthrowing the authorities. They must be dismissed with the most scrupulous indifference and derision...Power is no longer concentrated in one point...Anyone who defeats it locally sends a planetary shock wave through the networks” (p. 131).

The “Tarnaq 9” were arrested in France and accused of planning to sabotage the overhead electric lines of the national railroad. They had been living in the small rural town of Tarnaq, growing their own food, running a co-op and a store, and generally helping local people. Except for the — alleged — attempt to sabotage the trains they were simply following the nonviolent, reformist, strategy of dropping out of the big cities and mainstream institutions to gradually build alternate institutions. There is nothing bad about such activities. But they are not a strategy for overthrowing the state, capitalism, and all other oppressions. Power really is concentrated and it is very strong. It will have to be confronted by the organized people — in a real insurrection. (For further discussion of the distinction between revolutionary, class-struggle, anarchism and gradualist, alternate-institution, strategies, see Price 2009.)

The Greek Insurrection

These are important and very practical issues. In 2008, rebellion broke out in Greece after a youth was shot by a cop (in the context of the beginning of the Great Recession). There was a virtual national insurrection among young people, from high schoolers, to college students, to young workers and unemployed. Anarchists and other libertarian socialists had a major influence on this youth rebellion, especially including those of the insurrectionist trend.

Youth are the cutting edge of any revolution. But, while vitally important, by themselves alone they do not have the leverage of the working class. Unfortunately, Greek anarchists did not have the same influence among unionized workers as they did among college students. The big unions are still controlled by the Socialist Party, by the Communist Party, and even by Conservatives. Pressure by the workers forced the unions to engage in demonstrations and in limited, symbolic, mass strikes, but no more. Big sections of industry had wildcat strikes. Radicalized workers occupied the headquarters of the largest union to protest its lack of support to the rebellion. This was good, but more was needed.

In Greece and everywhere else, there is no alternative to revolutionary-libertarian socialists sinking roots in the working class and their unions. We need to spread a revolutionary program and to organize against the reformist bureaucracies. Greek class-struggle anarchists have been trying to do this for some time. Whether they will succeed is the key question for whether the Greek revolution will win.

Revolutionary class-struggle anarchists agree with the insurrectionists' rejection of capitalism and its state. They are our comrades, fighting the same enemy, for the same goals. But we do not agree with their analysis and strategy. Growing food in rural alternate communities is no replacement for a class-struggle approach, neither is having rebellions which are limited to isolated young people. What we need is not insurrectionism but revolution.

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