# The Revolutionary Practice of Anarchism

**Review of Zoe Baker, *Means & Ends: The Revolutionary Practice of Anarchism in Europe and the United States* (2023)**

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# Contents

This is an outstanding overview of the anarchist movement. It covers the period from 1868 (the approximate beginning of revolutionary anarchism as a movement) to 1939 (the defeat of the Spanish Revolution and the beginning of World War II). While anarchism has been a world movement, this book only covers European and U.S. anarchism, which has inherent limitations (also, the author admits to only reading English). Further, the text does not discuss all tendencies which have been regarded as anarchist. It does not deal with individualist or market-oriented anarchisms, nor with anarchist-pacifism nor some other trends.

Instead it focuses on what has been referred to as revolutionary class-struggle anarchism, also called libertarian socialism or libertarian communism. Today some advocate anarchisms without revolution or the working class. However, Lucien van der Walt considers that "the broad anarchist tradition." (van der Walt & Schmidt 2009; p. 19) Baker might agree with this, but would probably not go as far as van der Walt when he writes, "'Class struggle' anarchism, sometimes called revolutionary or communist anarchism, is not a type of anarchism; in our view it is the *only* anarchism." (same; emphasis in original) In any case, this is the anarchism that Baker concentrates on, which in itself contains a host of internal conflicts and controversies.

Anarchism does not have an official, orthodox, philosophy, comparable to the "dialectical materialism" of Marxism. But, as Baker summarizes, "The central argument of this book is that...anarchists...were grounded in a theoretical framework—the theory of practice—which maintained that, as people engage in activity, they simultaneously change the world and themselves...the anarchist commitment to the unity of means and ends." (p. 10)

In philosophy this is often called "praxis," a Greek word meaning practice-integrated-with-theory, as opposed to superficially empirical practice. As Baker knows, this was a fundamental aspect of Karl Marx's method, developed out of the dialectical theory of G.W.F. Hegel. Michael Bakunin, a "founder" of revolutionary anarchism, also studied Hegel's philosophy. A number of philosophers have considered the implications of focusing on humanity as actively productive, consciously interacting with objective reality, simultaneously changing the world and themselves. (Bernstein 1971; Price 2014)

## Controversies Among Anarchists

The book begins with the origins of the anarchist movement as an anti-statist wing of working class socialism. It reviews the values and basic strategies of anarchist anti-capitalism. This focuses on "direct action" by workers and the oppressed against the bosses and the state. Direct action included strikes, boycotts, tenant strikes, and civil disobedience. But anarchists also established schools for children and adults, community libraries, popular theaters, and sports clubs.

"Anarchism...emerged in parallel with, and opposition to, various forms of state socialism." (p. 141) Baker goes through anarchists' reasons for rejecting parliamen-

tarianism as well as Leninist revolutionary replacement of the existing state with a new (dictatorial) one. The state is a centralized, bureaucratic, hierarchical institution, standing over and above the rest of society, serving the interests of an exploitive minority. It cannot be used to build a classless, stateless, and non-oppressive society, whatever Marxists may think. She points out, correctly, that the program of state socialism in practice can only end in state capitalism.

While revolutionary anarchists agreed on certain fundamental commitments, they also had a number of disagreements. "Broadly speaking the anarchist movement can be divided into two main strategic schools of thought: insurrectionist anarchism and mass anarchism." (p. 171) (These were not terms used at the time, but were later assigned by van der Walt.) There was a great deal of overlapping of the schools in actual practice by individuals and groups; these are "pure types." ("Insurrectionism" has also been called "terrorism" by some, "guerrilla warfare" by others.)

The "insurrectionists" built little groups, which fluctuated in composition, and were associated — if at all — in loose networks. They were regarded as "anti-organizationalists," although they put out newspapers and had networks. They engaged in violent actions by individuals or small groups against the government or capitalist enterprises, sometimes against individual politicians or business people or just random citizens (eventually called "propaganda of the deed"). By such methods they hoped to trigger social revolution.

The "mass anarchists" (I would have preferred "mass struggle anarchists") wanted big associations, such as labor unions, community groups, anti-war organizations. These would be radically democratic, militant, and independent of capitalist institutions. This type of anarchist was often "dual-organizationalist," being for specific organizations of anarchists which would work inside and out of larger mass organizations. Their goal was to build popular struggles by workers and every other oppressed group, initially around immediate reform issues, but eventually leading to a social revolution.

Baker clearly comes down against insurrectionist anarchism due to its 150 years of failure. It is true that mass struggle anarchism also has not succeeded in making the revolution. But it has led to large unions in a number of countries, big anarchist federations, and significant military struggles. This is not enough — nothing short of a successful revolution is enough — but it has been more than insurrectionism has done.

Baker is fully aware that anarchist-socialist revolution must include all the oppressed and exploited, with concerns which overlap with class issues but also are distinct. This includes women, African-Americans, and so on. (But she does not discuss ecological issues.) "We must...struggle against all forms of oppression simultaneously. The self-emancipation of the working classes can only be achieved through intersectional class struggle." (p. 359)

This included support for national liberation struggles against imperialist domination (which is very different from taking sides in wars in which both sides are imperialists). "For anarchists, this commitment to universal human solidarity entailed an opposition to imperialism and colonialism and the support of anti-colonial national

liberation movements....According to Maximoff, 'the anarchists demand the liberation of all colonies and support every struggle for national independence....' The main goal of national liberation movements — emancipation — could only be achieved through the methods of anarchism, rather than the establishment of a new state." (pp. 109-110) That is quite contrary to the belief of many ignorant anarchists today that anarchism is opposed to national self-determination. (Many anarchists reject support for the Ukrainian people against Russian imperialist aggression on this false ground.)

## Syndicalist Anarchism

However, for Baker, this "intersectionality" does not deny the importance of the working class. This class has a central role in the total process of production and therefore has potentially great strategic power. This leads to her discussion of syndicalism. "All forms of syndicalist anarchism argued that workers should form federally structured trade unions that engaged in direct action and were independent of political parties....to pursue the double aim of winning immediate improvements in the present and overthrowing capitalism...in the long term." (p. 279)

She divides "syndicalist anarchism" into three types: "revolutionary syndicalism," "syndicalism-plus," and "anarcho-syndicalism." In her categorizing, revolutionary syndicalism would be open to all workers in their shop or industry, regardless of whether they were anarchists. Anarchist militants would seek to make the union as worker-run and militant as possible, with no association with any political party or tendency.

Syndicalism-plus (a term she took from Iain McKay) also had an "open" membership and would be non-affiliated to any political grouping. While anarchists would not try to take over the unions, they would not dissolve in them either. They would still form their own specific anarchist organization, to work inside and outside the syndicalist union. Anarcho-syndicalism, in her conception, would explicitly commit its unions to anarchist revolution. Probably this would be written into their constitutions. Baker reviews the arguments pro and con for the different versions of syndicalist anarchism. She notes that the distinction between revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism has become blurred (which she largely blames on Rudolf Rocker).

As mentioned, Baker says that syndicalist anarchists (in contrast to insurrectionist anarchists) "pursue the double aim of winning immediate improvements in the present...." However, she makes one exception: "One reform that mass anarchists consistently opposed was universal suffrage within existing capitalist states...included women's suffrage...." (p. 237) I don't doubt her accuracy but I think this is as aspect of anarchist sectarian over-purity.

I am thinking of the struggle for the right to vote for African Americans in the early '60s. Undoubtedly, there was the conscious aim of the liberal wing of the U.S. capitalist class to co-opt the mass movement and channel it into the Democratic Party . And the Black leadership was agreeable to this. On the other hand, the actual struggle involved

massive civil disobedience (law-breaking) and independent organizing. The goal of being allowed to vote was also a valid goal. It meant that Black people would no longer be second class citizens. It is better to live under a bourgeois democracy than under a racist and semi-fascist tyranny (which is what the segregationist South was). This does not deny the need for anarchists to point out the limitations of bourgeois representative democracy, which would not really free the Black population from the bottom of society. (Another example of sectarian inflexibility is the syndicalist anarchists rejection of "joining reformist unions." [p. 273] Carried out consistently, it would limit their ability to reach the mass of workers.)

Baker's last chapter before concluding is about organizational dualism. This is the idea that anarchists should organize themselves, or at least those with whom they are in substantial agreement. And this organized minority should become part of broader organizations and movements, including but not limited to, unions. She reviews the history from Bakunin's "Brotherhoods," to the syndicalists' concept of the "militant minority," to the "Platform" of Makhno and Arshinov, to Malatesta's ideas, and so on. Such political organization would be different from the Leninist concept of the centralized vanguard party. It would not aim at taking power for itself or establishing its own state. Its only aim was to encourage the workers and oppressed to organize themselves and reorganize society by themselves. To help people change the world as they change themselves.

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