

Compost the Colony

Exploring Anarchist Decolonization

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The term “decolonization” has gained prominence within the University over the last decade. From diets to international security, academics are talking about decolonizing. While the watering down and co-optation of the term “decolonization” is recognized (Tuck and Yang, 2012; Grosfoguel, 2016; IAM, 2017), this article briefly examines how anarchism might be useful for decolonization: what is anarchist decolonization or decoloniality?¹ The recent article by Lina Álvarez and Brendan Coolsaet (2020) on “Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies” indicates the affinity between anarchism and decolonization without saying it directly. In response, this article provides a conception of anarchist decolonization, which is accomplished by briefly reviewing a multiplicity of anarchist positions,² before locating and responding to observable tensions within decolonial theory from which anarchist decolonization departs.

Anarchism & Anarchy

Decolonial critics recognize that there exists a eurocentrism within Anarchism. This entails the problematic privileging of Enlightenment rationalism and materialist atheism, reducing issues solely to class (class-centric), and transposing Western conceptions of state, sovereignty, and law onto Indigenous cultures (Ciccariello-Maher, 2011; Ramnath, 2012; Barker and Pickerill, 2012). These limitations have resulted in calls for decolonizing anarchism (see Ciccariello-Maher, 2011; Ramnath, 2012; Pico in Ruiz, 2020). “We have lost and forgotten these links” to the earth, Josep Gardenyes (2011) contends, “to such an extent that in classic anarchist texts we find the same rationalist proposal to replace the capitalist war of all-against-all with the socialist war of ‘all against nature’” to create the “architecture of their controlled environment.” Recognizing this limitation, Maia Ramnath (2011: 26–8), however, notes at least three ways anarchism complements anti-colonial struggles. First, anarchism acknowledges the state as “extraneous to society” and anarchists act as the “primary resistance to the onset of industrialization” as “opposed to the Marxian and syndicalist [teleological developmental] assumption” (see also Springer, 2016). Second, anarchism asserts that the “agrarian peasant rather than industrial proletarians [represent] the leading edge of struggle” (see also Roman-Alcalá, 2020),³ and third, anarchism now recognizes the intersectionality of (economic, political, psychological, ideological, and military) oppressions encompassed in colonization, thus requiring a “total decolonization.” Decolonial anarchism necessitates the total liberation of humans and non-humans (Springer, forthcoming) and, following the insurrectionist tendency (see Loadenthal, 2017), the (neo)colonial state is identified as an occupying force waging a permanent low and high-intensity war to control natural “resources” and domesticate people.

Anarchism, however, has multiple positions and cross-pollinating tensions. Classical anarchism(s) such as anarcho-syndicalism and communism, while taking many shapes, emphasize collective struggle, labor organizing, and controlling productive infrastructures to institute egalitarian, self-organized, and worker-led workplaces, which includes abolishing wage-labor (see Rudolph Rocker, Peter Kropotkin, and Mikhail Bakunin). Anarcho-individualism and/or egoism alternatively emphasize free will and individual action over groups or ideological systems

¹ Anarchist Decolonization is preferred to “decolonality” because of, at least in North America, its academic roots and absence in Indigenous Anarchist texts outside the University.

² Because of word count, well-known scholars and journals are only named within the text. See Simon Springer (2016) for background on classical anarchist thinkers.

³ Obviously, there are Marxian varieties, but there are relational differences.

(see Max Stirner, Renzo Novatore, and Emma Goldman). These ideas have spawned Insurrectionary Anarchism, which challenges classical organizational strategies with “informal organization,” affinity groups, and unmediated action against the capitalist state (see Alfredo Bonanno & Jean Weir). Anarcho-nihilism, inspired by the 19th-century Nihilist movement and anarcho-individualism, breaks from articulating any future “hope” or “better tomorrow” and charts a path of evasion and destruction (see Novatore and Anonymous, 2013a). Insurrectionist and Nihilist tendencies have taken hold in Latin America (Anonymous, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Rodríguez, 2013, 2020; Ruiz, 2020; *Negación & Conspiración Acrata* Magazines); meanwhile Feminist and Queer expressions have also proliferated (see Beniamino, 2018; FBI, 2019; *Bash Back! & Bæden* Journal).

Finally, and particularly relevant to anarchist decolonization, is the Green and ecological anarchist constellation (see Green Anarchy, 2005; Clark, 2020). Influenced by the latter tendencies, green anarchism places ecological issues at its core, which includes land defense, animal liberation (anti-speciesism, veganism), and appreciation for horizontal Indigenous cultures. Green anarchism is associated with Anti-civilization anarchism, which recognizes the oppression and domination of the present within Ancient Civilization, originating before colonialism (see Green Anarchy, 2005; *Return Fire & Black Seed* Magazine). Anarcho-primitivism has been central to advancing anti-civilization critique and deconstructing technology, time, and culture, all the while advocating non-“civilized” lifeways and, in its extreme, a return to hunter and gatherer practices (see John Zerzan; el-Ojeili and Taylor, 2020). This brief, partial, and incomplete typology serves as a sample for crafting decolonial synergies.

There is an exhaustive number of positions, theories, and disagreements between anarchist tendencies. These come in the forms, for example, of anarchism versus anarchy (Green Anarchy, 2005) or civil versus subversive anarchists (see Anonymous, 2013). The latter frequently seek to distance themselves from workerism, bureaucratized forms of life, and, for our purposes here, its Eurocentric underpinnings. Instructive is defining anarchism as a tension. Alfredo Bonanno (1998 [1996]: 2) contends:

Anarchism is not a concept that can be locked up in a word like a gravestone. It is not a political theory. It is a way of conceiving life, and life, young or old as we may be, old people or children, is not something definitive: it is a stake we must play day after day. When we wake up in the morning and put our feet on the ground we must have a good reason for getting up, if we don't it makes no difference whether we are anarchists or not. We might as well stay in bed and sleep.

Anarchism is relational, believing in self-organized, unmediated direct action. It does not believe in separating theory from action, which has created an inclination for anarchists to reject universities (see Springer, 2016). “Our anarchism is not pure,” contends Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2014: 12): “it is stained with indigeneity,” feminism, ecology, and even with spirituality. Anarchistic and anti-authoritarian tensions refuse neat categorization, taking multiple shapes and forms within the Pluriverse of struggle.

Despite the diversity of anarchist thought (see Anonymous, 2014b; Rodríguez, 2013, 2020; Maldonado, 2012; Maxwell and Craib, 2015; Ruiz, 2020), following Aragorn's (2005) search for an Indigenous Anarchism, there are three important relational pillars: direct action, mutual aid, and voluntary cooperation. Direct action stresses unmediated action through self-organization, but also through attacking structures of domination. Mutual aid is the voluntary reciprocal exchange of resources and services for mutual benefit (see Kropotkin; Goldman; Springer, 2016).

Meanwhile, voluntary cooperation is how individuals determine their activities: how and with whom they experience life. These traits have long existed implicitly, and have been expressed differently, in various Indigenous cultures across the world. Anarchism, in this sense, offers one way to speak about the rejection of domination emanating from groups, bureaucracies, technological systems, infrastructural arrangements, economic imperatives, environmental justice “leaders” (depending on the context), and coercive authority itself. The claim to follow “*the leadership of oppressed people* is in fact manipulation, because not all oppressed people are going in the same direction,” explains John Severino (2015):

If we are honest about it, we can reject the false neutralism, the cynical selflessness of “ally politics,” and recognize that we have to make choices about who we want to support, who we want to fight alongside, and these choices will arise from our own subjectivity, our own need to struggle, our own vision of freedom.

Rooted in self-reflection and anti-authoritarian vision, anarchist action aims to reject all domination and political control.

Decolonial Theory: Authoritarian versus Anti-authoritarian

Decolonial thought, like anarchism, is in different intensities rooted in combative practice and struggles for self-determination. Decolonization as a term is historically associated with Marxist-Leninist and Maoist armed struggle and Article 1(2) of the 1945 UN Charter asserting the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples. Decolonization in academia not only revives authoritarian Marxism(s) but also revives a reductionist and divisive identity politics that panders to university hierarchy and liberal reformism (see Asher, 2013; Grosfoguel, 2016). While autonomous Marxism is valuable, and decolonial theory offers important interventions into the diversification of knowledge, university-based decolonial theory — often referred to as the “modernity/coloniality-decoloniality” (MCD) project — exemplifies these criticisms.

Today, “MCD scholars are patrolling theoretical and political borders” within the university, observes Kiran Asher (2013: 839), noting how postcolonial scholars — but also European-based scholars — are creating arbitrary theoretical and identity-based criteria. “[W]hy ignore Spivak and claim Gandhi?” asks Asher (2013: 839). Bashing Eurocentrism and Marxian thought — and rightfully so, in many respects — this arbitrary line is further exemplified by Mignolo (2010: 1) applauding Max Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School because it “condensed a tradition of Jewish critical thinkers in Germany during the early years of Hitler’s regime that, although Marxist in spirit, was entangled with racism and coloniality in the body.” This divisive border patrolling, Asher (2013: 840) indicates, arises from a type of “de/postcolonial identity politics and nationalism within academia.” Cusicanqui (2014: 7) might counter rightfully that “identity is constructed by living in the present.” Moreover, as Ramón Grosfoguel (2016: 134–5) reminds us, this academic policing is compounded with “epistemic extraction” by MCD scholars appropriating “ideas from thinkers” in struggle “without any political commitment to social movements or the struggles of Indigenous and Afro peoples.”

Identity politics create exploitable boundaries and rely on a reductionist essentialism. Asher (2013: 839) points out how MCD texts “pay scant attention to heterogeneity and diversity within the [Latin American] continent.” This includes affirming categories of analysis and avoiding their

different articulations and politics. “[D]ecolonial literature pays little attention to the fact that culture itself is often contested at the local level,” explain Iokiñe Rodríguez and Mirna Liz Inturias (2018: 91), who bridge this issue by engaging decolonial theory at the “intra-communal level.” Raúl Zibechi (2012: 320, 268) criticizes decolonial scholars’ use of the term “social movements,” instead offering the concept of “movements” or “societies in movement” to demonstrate political and cultural differences motivating mobilizations and uprisings. This issue coincides with the fact that many MCD thinkers are not anti-state, not only (implicitly) celebrating the colonial collaboration of Gandhi (cf Dunlap, 2020: 22), but also the presidential power of Evo Morales because it is “the collective project of state decolonizing” that has links with grassroots mobilizations (Walsh, 2018: 51).⁴ Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ support for Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), asserting that he “is a man who is not corrupt” as he spreads highly contested industrial corridors across Mexico, thus serving as another example of authoritarian applause (Velázquez, 2019). While there are different developmental logics behind different Civilizations, these should not act as an excuse for the organization of domination and ecological catastrophe. Decolonial theory has statist and authoritarian sympathies, which anarchist decolonization inherently rejects.

The state, however, is frequently rejected in decolonial literature outside academia. Anti-authoritarian decolonial tendencies are prevalent outside the university and within it, arguably, arising from the post-development school. An anti-authoritarian and anarchistic tension is strong within the post-development school, where post-development prioritizes affinity over “identity politics and nationalism within academia” (see Rahnema, 1997; Kothari et al., 2019). Outside the academy, decolonial writings identify the state as central to (neo)colonialism or coloniality. Indigenous anarchists have highlighted the variations and complications with “Indigenous” as an authoritative label. The works of Aragorn (2005, 2018), Taiiaki Alfred, Rob los Ricos, Zig Zag/ Gord Hill, Cante Waste (2012), Cusicanqui, Klee Benally, Indigenous Action Media (IAM, 2014, 2017), and many others are central to developing Indigenous Anarchism(s) and anti-authoritarian decolonization. Articulating an Indigenous Egoism, Cante Waste (2012: 5) criticizes “a simplistic view of self-interest” and asserts “Individualism as a Tenet of Decolonization” to combat self-hatred and assimilation and to embody a “Native Pride” that internalizes “that we matter, to us, and start acting in our self-interest” against the colonial/statist system. *Black Seed: A Journal of Indigenous Anarchy* (2014-present) remains another under-acknowledged resource for anarchist and anti-authoritarian decolonization. Overall, the point here is that “your politics matter,” as a Michif-Cree reminds us. Recognizing the value of anarchism, this person (Anonymous, 2018: 5, 14) conveys the complications of political struggle in Indigenous territory:

Saying you support Indigenous sovereignty doesn’t mean backing every Indigenous person on every project. There are plenty of Indigenous misogynists, and ladder-climbing politicians out there, and you don’t do me any favors by helping them gain power. Fight for liberatory ideas, not for nations or bloodlines.

⁴ See, for example, the radical contrast with anarchist perspectives on Morales voiced and documented by Gustavo Rodríguez (2020).

Anarchist Decolonization

The state is an advancement of the colony model — the material infrastructure of (neo)colonialism (see Dunlap, 2018). “Pick yourself a point whether it is police, prisons or whether it is militarism or whether it is environmental devastation,” explains Ward Churchill (2002), “and the point of confluence is named the state.” The state, for Churchill (and anarchists), is a “unitary target that encompasses [and intersects with] the whole,” instrumental to corporate capital, and the “internal colonization and oppression of native North America is contingent upon the existence of centralized state structures...north and south of the border, and elsewhere for that matter!”

Anarchist decolonization recognizes the state as central to facilitating (neo)colonialism, but also intersecting processes of domination that manifest in genocide, ecocide, and various forms/intensities of slavery. Decolonial epistemic deconstruction resonates with (geo)archeological inquiries into “statism,” which locate and challenge the “epistemological ‘fix’” perpetuating self-reinforcing statist mythology and oppression (Torre and Ince, 2018: 181). Anarchist decolonization rejects this mythology organized to perpetuate the world-eating Leviathan, consuming and re-directing human and nonhuman resources into its cybernetic infrastructure and circuits of capital.

Statist reformism propels socio-ecological destruction. Reforms frequently organize socio-ecological domination at a lower intensity, meanwhile allowing a greater quantity of “less” or “friendlier” forms of socio-ecological degradation. Supporting Álvarez and Coolsaet (2020), justice must be plural, relational, and based on a praxis of mutual aid, voluntary association, and direct action. Categorical dimensions of environmental justice (distributional, recognitional, and procedural) are progressive impositions channeling forms of rebellion and protest into statist institutions, and separating the whole into different parts to permit socio-ecological extraction on more egalitarian terms. In practice, anarchist decolonization, as Gardenyees (2011: 14–15) reminds us, means not seeing “revolution as something organized according to a unified plan,” looking down from above “as if it were a game of *Risk*.” Instead, anarchists are stronger by moving “in the network of our own relationships, to “communicate horizontally or circularly” and devising the best ways to complement those who are different and following divergent paths towards socio-ecological liberation (Ibid.). Anarchism offers a complementary toolbox of ideas and exists outside its Western variations (See anonymous, 2013, 2014; Rodríguez, 2013, 2020; Maldonado, 2012; Maxwell and Craib, 2015; Ruiz, 2020). Anarchism, in its pluriverse of articulations, continues to evade enclosure and conceptual reification to express an ungovernable force against domination and ecological destruction.

Anarchist decolonization places autonomous, horizontal, and “anarchistic” socio-cultural values — in their diversity and potential — as central to decolonization, which challenges the legacies of civilizations, re-branding authoritarianism and centralized control through identity politics. This embodies Álvarez and Coolsaet’s (2020: 57) acknowledgement of the inverse: “those who are marginalized and racialized are not necessarily free from the risk of coloniality.” Techno-capitalist progress is the art of capturing “the desires of the subjugated” (Ibid.). Álvarez and Coolsaet (2020: 60) mention Canadian oil pipeline development on First Nation land, noting how participatory strategies “transformed ‘how Indigenous peoples now think and act in relation to the land’” (see also Dunlap, 2018a). Manipulative participatory strategies are central to state structures and development, influencing people and attempting to manage rebellion in favor of socio-ecological

extraction. Equally concerning is the realization that everyone resisting the state and the onslaught of development, to various degrees, will become targeted by security forces (see Dunlap, 2020). Anarchist decolonization recognizes that not only is the location from which one speaks important, but also the anti-authoritarian politics and knowledge people choose to articulate and practice.

Conclusion

This article has sought to introduce the notion of anarchist decolonization. Briefly reviewing different strands of anarchist thought, fault lines within decolonial theory, and people identifying with Indigenous anarchism, this article highlights the affinity between anarchism and decolonization. Anarchist decolonization is resolutely anti-state and rejects the myths of capitalist progress, struggling against forms of domination and embracing various spiritual and ecological practices. The state, thinking of Patrick Wolfe, is the structure of conquest that is continuous, variegated, and morphing: infecting its subjects and articulating decentralized and “bottom-up” governance strategies. This article seeks to create an explicit opening to advance decolonial, anarchist, or anarchist decolonial thinking. Creating new academic labels and analytical categories, it should be recognized, is itself a double-edged sword. While this might be a useful point of reference for discussing new ways to understand diverse anti-authoritarian political practices, it can also make visible what should remain silent, evasive, and subversive. Anarchist decolonization, like anarchy, should remain too slippery, chaotic, and amorphous to capture or hold. A fluid concept, anarchist decolonization seeks to revitalize a spirit rejecting, grinding, and dancing through circular holds of power and psychosocial traps of domination, which as always deserve greater experimentation and elaboration that is both loud and quiet.

Author Note

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