

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Anarchism – a scattered history

Aragorn Eloff

31 Jul 2015

Aragorn Eloff
Anarchism – a scattered history
31 Jul 2015

<https://meme.co.za/?p=165>

This was a piece developed to be read out at one of the sessions of the Cape Town Anarchist Winter School, which was run by the bolo'bolo anarchist collective in mid-2015.

<https://www.bolobolo.co.za/>

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

It is time to tell our story again; our many stories. To trace back the countless threads that lead to this present moment; weaving back through time and place to locate, if not an origin, then at least those singular moments where the flame of anarchy shone brightest.

It is hard to know how to begin and we will necessarily miss and gloss over much. Our history has seldom been told by us and those who have deemed to tell it have maligned and marginalised us. Out of fear perhaps, or a desire for power over others. Because of this we have only some fragments to piece together; a map with so many places still marked 'unknown'.

But still, we have kept some of our memories safe from those who sought to erase them. Through our hidden archives, our clandestine publications and our international networks of all who resist domination, we have passed along our stories of struggle, our victories and defeats, so that they may serve to nurture new struggles in these urgent times.

How far back do these stories go? Every time we attempt to locate an origin, we find it to be little more than an impure

mix of all that came before it. Our ideas, our aspirations, our practices, did not spring fully formed from the minds of intellectuals. Rather, they emerged from the lives of common people, from the broad masses of humanity, articulated in various ways in different times and places. There is no pure beginning, only a continuous coming together and drifting apart.

Let us nonetheless attempt to start right at the beginning.

Who did we first learn all this from? Who were the first among us to defy authority? To seek the abolition of all governance, all hierarchy, all domination. When first did we hold the land in common, in conditions of free equality?

If we are honest with ourselves, then the origins of anarchy are identical with the origins of humanity itself. For the tens of thousands of years that preceded the emergence of sedentary, state-driven societies – civilization – all of us lived in relatively leaderless, egalitarian, face to face communities where nobody had any real power over anybody else.

The gender-egalitarian Inuit, the small family bands of San, or Bushmen, the Mbuti pygmies who solve conflict and power imbalances through humour. The Yurok, the Lugbara, the Nuer, the Guarani, Konkomba, Tiv, Tonga, Ifugao, Santals...

None of these communities was pristine or perfect, of course. There was some gender bias. There was some violence. There was some mystification and there was some conformism. But there was not what we today understand as entrenched hierarchy. There was no private property. There was no entrenched coercion. There was no exploitation. Even today, in the mountainous Zomia region of South East Asia, millions of us still live in these stateless conditions of free exchange and direct participation.

But it is dangerous to limit ourselves to our mythic origins. We can learn much from how we have been in the past, and how some of us remain in the present, but we should not seek to simply return to this. What, then, of anarchy within civilization, within our state-driven, highly centralised societies?

Did it begin with the Daoists in ancient China? The radical communitarianism of the Anabaptists or the Heresy of the Free Spirit? What of the Doukhobors, or the Ranters or the Levellers? Doubtless some of the threads of our anarchist tradition wove their way through these movements.

We stood alongside the Diggers of 17th century England, who through Gerard Winstanley called for all of humanity to reclaim the land that had been enclosed; to hold and work it in common as equals, to give and receive freely, without measure. Do you remember what it felt like as they fought us on St George's Hill, seeking to eradicate this new life we had created? Do you remember the anger and fear in their eyes?

Then we were roused by the polemic of William Godwin and by the relentless individualism of Max Stirner and his union of egoists. With him we sought an end to all abstractions – all spooks of the mind as he called them – that separated us from our being in the world.

And then came Proudhon. He was the first to proudly identify as an anarchist; to give a name to what we all had in common. We can still all recall what he said of the theft that is private property: “If I were asked to describe slavery,” he said, “I should answer in one word, It is murder!, my meaning would be understood at once. No extended argument would be required to show that the power to remove a man's mind, will, and personality, is the power of life and death, and that it makes a man a slave. It is murder. Why, then, to this other question: What is property? may I not likewise answer, It is robbery!”

Recall also how he wanted no part of laws and acknowledged none; how he protested against every order with which some authority felt pleased on the basis of some alleged necessity to over-rule his free will. Laws: We know what they are, and what they are worth! They are spider webs for the rich and mighty, steel chains for the poor and weak, fishing nets in the hands of government.

But it was the Russian Mikhail Bakunin who first ignited the flames of revolution for us; who raged along with us against the church and the State, goading us on in our call for the creative destruction of all the tyrannical institutions that claimed to rule us.

And then the common people in France seized Paris, and for two glorious months the Paris Commune offered us a glimpse of the world that could be. Living and fighting together in revolutionary solidarity, we also attempted to prefigure new relations between us, women and men struggling together side by side. Our compassion was not forgotten then either. Who among us will forget the night that, as we were being mercilessly bombarded by those who would reclaim control of the city, Louise Michel risked her life at the barricades to rescue a kitten, terrified and hiding from the noise of falling mortar shells.

Roused by revolutionary fervour, and carrying the spirit of the Commune in our hearts, we joined the First International, along with Marx and his followers. Bakunin was right from the beginning though: the Marxists would never give up the state they sought to capture for the good of the workers. The whole 20th century was a terrible vindication of this for all of us. And so we left the international and travelled from all across Europe to St Imier in Switzerland, where in 1872 we joined the Jura Federation in the creation of our own Anarchist Congress. 150 years later, when we regrouped in St Imier in celebration we numbered over 5 000 from every corner of the globe. Did you feel it there in St Imier? As we shared free vegan food and the black flags flew in the streets, the threads had all woven together again and the ghosts of our long history walked among us: Bakunin, Proudhon, the anarchist watchmakers of Jura.

But let's return to that time when anarchism was first taking root in the fertile soil of dissent across the world. Do you remember how with the Spanish Regional Federation we ran entire cities in southern Spain on anarcho-syndicalist principles

our workplaces and in our daily lives. And, although this flag carries all of our rich history with it, we must always remember that we fight and live together for a day when we no longer need it.

As Jean Genet once reminded us, we may need the black flags in order to win, but we must make sure to burn them all afterwards.

during the Cantonalist Revolt? Do you remember the Black International we formed, uniting anarchist unions in Mexico, Uruguay, Cuba and Argentina? There was barely a Marxist in sight back then: almost all of us who became radicalised in our workplaces, in our communities, were anarchists.

Indeed the works of Kropotkin were far more popular back then than the writings of Marx. We understood something for the first time through Kropotkin: that the egalitarian relations we found among the workers of the Jura mountains reflected a principle of mutual aid that was a key factor of our evolutionary heritage. And through this understanding we realised that as anarchists we had to achieve full communism; the collectivism of Bakunin and the mutualism of Proudhon were insufficient and still bore the vestiges of capitalism.

Do you recall how in Italy, fueled by rage at the injustices perpetrated against us by the state, thirty of us gathered together and began an insurrection in Benevento, spreading anarchy through the villages, burning cash registers and declaring the end of the king's reign? Even a priest joined us that first day!

Soon after, not content with mere declarations, one of our own, Gaetano Bresci, murdered King Umberto I and we came up with a term to describe his act: propaganda by the deed.

How complex our movement is, that at the same time we were murdering kings in Italy we were advocating nature conservation, vegetarianism and the abolition of vivisection in France along with Elise Reclus and fighting anti-Chinese racism in Australia.

It felt like we were everywhere back then. Do you remember all the anarchist newspapers in Brazil? Over a hundred of them, some daily. In them we shared our vision just as we shared it in the schools we ran, in the theatre groups we performed in, in our rallies against war and conscription and in our mobilisations against exploitation in the workplace. They deported over a thousand of us, and in Sao Paulo in 1898 they

murdered Polenice, but wherever they put out a fire, ten more would spring up in its place. Chased from the cities we founded Cecilia, our free love commune where two hundred of us lived and worked the land together. Even today the descendants of those original Cecilians speak of those times with a wild passion in their eyes.

We established communes in Macedonia too, in Strandzha and Krusevo, and soviets in St Petersburg and Moscow. In Poland we formed the Anarchist Black Cross to bring aid and justice for anarchist prisoners. In the Netherlands we even had our own library. Our own musical society. Our own choir. We sought to apply anarchy to every aspect of our collective and individual being and we created much of beauty.

We were never content to simply hide away in our communes and clubs though. We knew that capital and the state were forever expanding their reach and that soon no refuge would be available. And so we rose up with the peasants in Patagonia in Argentina only to be brutally repressed, with over 1 500 of us dead.

Even when there were few of us, we followed Galleani in Vermont and Goldman in New York in their attempts to bring about mass uprisings through political assassinations. Csolgosz even managed to kill president McKinley, but too many of our bombs exploded in the wrong places and killed the wrong people and the masses did not rise up and much repression was brought against us. Still, who can forget poor Nestor the anarchist chef who tried to poison the guests at an elite banquet of bankers and lawyers in Chicago.

We were powerful then. We were such a threat, that they formed the FBI to stop us. And Interpol. Who would believe that today?

We also learned at this time that it was pointless to argue about whether property is greedy or not, if masters are good or bad, if the state is paternal or despotic, if laws are just or unjust, if courts are fair or unfair, if the police are merciful or brutal.

these businesses still exist. We have a hotel in Buenos Aires where each of us works for the same wage, where each of us has the same decision-making capacity, where none of us is above any other of us.

Then the economy began to collapse all across the world. In Greece the streets erupted as never before. We stormed parliament and almost managed to claim it. We looted supermarkets and dispensed the food and money to poor and immigrant communities, many of whom were living in fear the right wing fascism that was emerging in our country. We invited them into our homes, into our neighbourhoods, and we protected each other.

In Israel we protested against the apartheid wall, and worked in solidarity with our Palestinian sisters and brothers.

In universities across Europe and the US we occupied, releasing ringing manifestos and denouncing the dominant order that had left us without a future. Our numbers growing once again we decided to occupy everything: in Egypt, in Syria, in New York, in London...Anarchism was everywhere in Occupy; at the beginning anyway, before the inevitable co-optation by liberals and politicians and NGOs and power seekers. Next time we will not make the same mistakes.

And today, right now, we hear reports of anarchist movements, insurgencies, struggles and projects in Rojava, in Costa Rica, in Estonia, French Guyana, Lebanon, Turkey, Slovakia and Swaziland.

It is hard to know how to end and we have necessarily missed and glossed over much. There is so much more. But we have remembered some things. We have told one story.

Perhaps in closing, there is one more hard-earned lesson we can remind ourselves of. For 170 years the black flag – the flag that signifies an end to all flags – has flown over us; over our free territories, our communes, our squats, our barricades, our strike lines and our infoshops; in the streets – or in our streets, rather, because all this is ours – and in our communities, in

logging machines could not cut them down. We destroyed a luxury ski resort built over a pristine natural habitat. We freed horses from glue factories and chickens from battery farms. Today under the names Conspiracy of Cells of Fire and the Informal Anarchist Federation we are active in Mexico, Italy, Chile and Russia, and we make no compromise in defence of the Earth and wildness.

In England we shouted 'enough is enough' when the government tried to impose the poll tax and we were overawed when millions joined us and the tax failed to pass. We reclaimed the streets so many times in those heady years, protesting against industrial expansion and the ongoing destruction of the natural world. We came together as travellers, throwing free dance festivals in forests and in squats, temporary autonomous zones where anything was possible. We tasted real freedom here and, looking to share it further, we opened infoshops, autonomous social centers, Food Not Bombs networks, anarchist bookfairs and radical publishers in every city where an anarchist could be found.

We were in Senegal too. And in Sierra Leone, where we formed a 3 000-strong branch of the IWW with those exploited in the diamond mines. In Nigeria we worked as the Awareness League, in Zimbabwe we were the Uhuru Network and in South Africa we gathered together as the Anarchist Resistance Movement and then the Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front.

In the years of globalisation, inspired by the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, we gathered in our hundreds of thousands and found each other again for the first time in far too long in the streets of Seattle, then in Italy, then in Canada; wherever the World Bank and the WTO and the IMF, all these new neoliberal financial institutions tried to meet, we tried to shut them down. Sometimes we succeeded. In Argentina when the economy collapsed due to the machinations of these same institutions, we gathered together and reclaimed the thousands of businesses that had been abandoned. Today over 1 000 of

When we talked about property, state, masters, government, laws, courts and police, we said only that we don't want any of them.

We learned fast not to tolerate half measures and reforms; that oppression would be brutal even when we marched peacefully in the streets. In Chicago we we marched for the eight hour working day and the police responded with brutality. A bomb was thrown and a short while later a handful of us were hung. Today we celebrate the first of May as International Workers Day but do we know that we are celebrating the lives of the anarchist martyrs of Haymarket Square and that we owe the eight hour working day at least in part to their resolve?

In the years following the Haymarket anarchism spread rapidly through the United States. In many cases it was brought by immigrants from Italy, Spain and other parts of Europe, often seeking escape from oppression and deprivation in their homelands. Together we created strong, resilient and diverse communities that saw no need to exclude anyone based on gender, race or nationality.

We travelled the country, spreading the black flames of dissent wherever we went. We stood on platforms in the center of cities, surrounded by tens of thousands of workers and poor, as Lucy Parsons and Emma Goldman and Voltairine de Cleyre spoke to us of liberty, of the abolition of the state, of free love and free thought. True to her anarchist ethos, Voltairine even forgave the man who tried to assassinate her at one of her speeches; nobody should be imprisoned; justice should restore the dignity of human beings and not diminish it, she said. Such powerful words these women spoke. We laughed when the Chicago police department said that Lucy was more dangerous than a thousand rioters, but we knew it was true, and the riots unfolded wherever she visited.

Inspired by the radical Spanish educator Francesco Ferrer, we created our own anarchist schools in New York. One, the

Modern School, ran for over forty years before we decided it was time to close.

Back in Spain, we formed federations, linking workplaces in resistance and seeking to reclaim the land and the factories from the bosses. We fed and housed each other as the massive general strikes unfolded across the country. Wary of reform, we made impossible demands: seven and a half hours of rest in an eight hour working day. These were demonstrations of the real power we held together. We knew they could not stop us. When they tried to conscript us into the army in order to break up our communities we simply did not print the conscription notices. After all, we were those who did the work at all the printing presses. When they begged us to return to work, we told them to release every single political prisoner in Spain, and they did.

We saw the power of these workplace unions and so in 1905 we formed the International Workers of the World, uniting anarcho-syndicalists from South Africa to Argentina to France.

Even in Mexico, the anarchist revolution was in the air. In the northern regions we formed an armed insurgent anarchist movement with the Magon brothers and in 1910 started the Mexican revolution against the capitalists and the oppressive state. At the same time in the south, we struggled together with Emilio Zapata and the peasants who were losing their land to the wealthy elite; we fought to establish communal land rights across Mexico and we almost succeeded. Today our memory is kept alive by the Zapatistas and the hundreds of autonomous communities they have created across the southern parts of the country.

As we worked to establish our movement across the globe, we made many mistakes. Many of us united with the Bolsheviks in Russia during the revolution; we believed the lies of Lenin and Trotsky that the state would wither away and we would reach full communism in our lifetimes. How brutally they oppressed us as soon as they took power. We will not

this day, however much heroin the government tries to flood our communities with. However severe their so-called anti-terrorism tactics are.

We went underground in Brazil and Uruguay and Argentina during the various dictatorships and military juntas. We forged alliances with the Mapuches and other indigenous South American people. We fought in solidarity with them against the encroachment of ecocidal capitalism on their way of life. So many of us were disappeared by the government in those times, but we kept our movements strong even when we had to meet in secret, even when our printing presses were seized and our newspapers banned. We hid each other in the basements of our houses and our ateneos in Rio de Janeiro. We built up an enormous archive of anarchist history in Buenos Aires. We built the powerful practice of *especificismo* and organised neighbourhoods in Montevideo.

In Germany we donned our balaclavas and as autonomen took the streets three thousand strong, destroying corporate property and clashing with police and fascists using the now widespread tactics of the black bloc. And when we left the streets it was to the many squats we had occupied, where we could escape from the pressure of capitalist life in order to spend our time plotting resistance and exploring alternative ways.

In Switzerland we became enraged at the expansion of the nuclear industry and Marco, brave Marco Camenisch, single-handedly blew up so much of their destructive infrastructure that he is still, 25 years later, in prison.

Since the beginning we have seen what capitalism and the state mean for all of life on Earth; what cruelty and destruction they bring. And so we formed the Earth and Animal Liberation Fronts, breaking into laboratories under cover of night to rescue rabbits and beagles from unspeakable and pointless experiments and to destroy research into GM crops. We burned mining equipment. We drove ceramic spikes into trees so that the

from the authoritarian communists and those who fetishised organisation, of course.

Once again, there were small glimmers of life, seeds growing up through the thawing snow and, once we had again built up our numbers and reflected on where had been and what was still possible, we saw that in fact anarchism had spread much further than we could ever have imagined. In Iraq we came together as anarchist communists to fight the Ba'athists. We crossed over into Iran and formed The Scream of the People, a movement committed to supporting the autonomous neighbourhood shorahs and workers kommithehs.

In Italy we joined Alfredo Maria Bonanno, father of the new wave of insurrectionary anarchism, in daring bank robberies, where we liberated ill gotten capital and redistributed it to revolutionary projects. Even at 70, Alfredo was robbing banks.

In the Netherlands we called ourselves Provos and Kabouters and we created provocative, radical art in public spaces, poking fun at the grey-faced banality of the society of the spectacle. Today when we ride around Amsterdam on our white bicycles we're proud to remember that it was us, the anarchist Provos, who first gifted these free bicycles to the city.

In the US, we formed Black Mask and Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers. We forced our way into the pentagon to protest against the war. We set up free housing, free clinics, free stores and free food for marginalised and radical communities.

In Greece we united with the students in 1973 when they rose up at the Polytechnic in Athens against the military junta. We painted Down With The State on the front gates and thousands of us occupied the space, putting up barricades in the streets and fighting battles against the police. They killed so many of us that dark night of November 17th, the army with their tanks. Undefeated, we occupied the neighbourhood of Exarchia, turning it into an anarchist free zone that survives to

forget how they murdered us in the anarchist uprisings in Kronstadt and St Petersburg, or how they rounded so many of us up in the streets and executed us merely for posing a threat to their hegemony; how every free soviet became a hierarchy run by the central bureaucracy. Emma Goldman visited us during this time and left horrified at the creeping totalitarianism.

Still, even though our revolution had failed in Russia, we were heartened by the Makhnovists in the Ukraine, where militants formed the Revolutionary Insurgent Army and liberated a shifting territory of seven million people. In some parts of the Free Territory we lived in conditions of near anarchy for almost three years, until the war crushed our hopes. It was not perfect, but for almost three years we lived and breathed the powerful vision that had been set out by Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta and all the others. Who would believe that today? And who would believe that just after this, we ran the entire city of Guangzhou in China as an anarchist commune for a year until, once more, the iron fist of repression struck us down once more.

We were strong, even in the East. In Japan we published the Farmer's Gospel; a radical anarchist text that inflamed hearts and minds. With Noe Ito and Sakae Osugi we began an anarcho-feminist journal and translated the works of Kropotkin, Goldman and others into our tongue. For this we were arrested, beaten to death and thrown into an abandoned well by the military police.

In Manchuria, in 1929, we even established the Shinmin free zone where two million of us lived for several years in directly democratic villages and our own peasant militia. There was such power back then; such possibility between us. Everybody could look each other in the eyes as an equal.

Back in the US our hearts broke when they hung Sacco and Vanzetti to send a message to the anarchist community. We rose up in solidarity Tokyo, Sydney, Sao Paulo, Rio, Buenos Aires and Johannesburg on that day. Who can forget the self-

less last words of Sacco, as the noose was tied around his neck: I might have died, unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure. This is our career and our triumph. Never in our full life could we hope to do such work for tolerance, for justice, for man's understanding of man as now we do by accident. Our words — our lives — our pains — nothing! The taking of our lives — lives of a good shoemaker and a poor fish-peddler — all! That last moment belongs to us — that agony is our triumph.

Some of us had such courage. When the Nazis arrested our playwright and poet Erich Muhsam in 1930 for making fun of their repulsive regime, he remained defiant in the face of their abuse. After they had broken his teeth with their muskets, stamped a swastika on his scalp with a red hot brand and turned his body in a mass of bleeding flesh, they made him dig his own grave and then, standing him up, tried to force him to sing the Nazi anthem. Instead, Erich straightened his shoulders, held his head high and sang the Internationale.

It is time to speak of Spain.

It was Fanelli who first brought anarchy to us in Spain, after meeting with Bakunin in 1868. It was his passion, kept alive for decades, that inspired us to rise up against the exploitative bourgeois landowners in the town of Casas Viejas in 1933. We learned repression then too, when they rounded us up in our comrade's cottage and set us all alight. The rest of our comrades they shot in the back after forcing them to watch our last moments.

But we were not afraid of ruins. With Durruti and Berneri and Montseny and all the others we were going to inherit the earth; there was not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie might have sought to blast and ruin its own world before it left the stage of history but we carried a new world in our hearts. And that world was growing in that very minute. And so, when the civil war broke out in 1936, we united millions of workers through our union, the CNT, kept strong in turn by the anarchists of the FAI. In Aragon, in Catalonia, we

created free communes and liberated workplaces. We ran the fields and factories together; from each according to ability and desire, to each according to need. We socialised the tramways. We created ways of reaching decisions together without creating hierarchies. By all accounts we ran the cities far better for those short few months before the war overwhelmed us and we were forced to side with our class enemies against the fascists, who came to power anyway and quickly wiped our newly-found way of life from the landscape. They could not erase those most powerful memories though, of when millions of us, liberated women and men, lived rich and thriving lives without landlords, without bosses, without the competition of capitalism.

There was a dark time after that. War had spread across the globe and our movement was in retreat. We kept the spirit alive in our social centers, through our books, in the small communities that remained. And with the help of our gifted printer friend Lucio, who forged official documents and even bank notes so convincingly that the authorities found it possible to detect them, many of us managed to escape imprisonment and certain death by fleeing to other countries with the passports he gifted us.

Anger at the fascism in Spain never died down. Decades later our comrade Stuart Christie, whose anarchist cell the Angry Brigade had caused havoc against the state in his home country of England, travelled here to assassinate Franco, the dictator. He almost succeeded.

Then in May of 1968, the streets exploded in Paris in spontaneous revolt and our hope in the revolutionary desire of common people was rekindled when we saw the black flags waved high, the bricks flown through bank windows, and more so the solidarity between students and workers and the homeless. Beneath the paving stones, the beach, said the graffiti, and all of us immediately understood what it meant. All of us apart