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A Flame to Extinguish Capital: Review of Black Flame

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Book Review of *Black Flame: The revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism*. Oakland, CA: AK Press. By Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt.

en.anarchistlibraries.net

At the outset, after reading *Black Flame*, it's impossible not to reflect on the massive amount of research that such a work must have entailed. The book is a narrative about anarchism and, with interest in anarchism on the rise worldwide, it could not have come at a better time. There are a couple of reasons for this. One, we need new narratives of the anarchist tradition to understand where we've been. Secondly, *Black Flame* contains critiques of the ways that "radical" circles contemporarily have too often turned away from the radical class politics that have always defined the socialist movement.

Ironically enough, this is both a major strength of the book, but also, in my opinion, one of its weaknesses. As Schmidt and van der Walt state their case early in the book, "'(c)lass struggle' anarchism, sometimes called revolutionary or communist anarchism, is not a type of anarchism; in our view, it is the *only* anarchism" (19 – emphasis theirs). This essentially leads to the authors deciding throughout the beginning of the book who the "real" anarchists are and who gets defined out.

Again, there are strengths *and* weaknesses with this approach.

This is one of the major strengths of the book, first and foremost, because some contemporary anarchists do seem to have lost their commitment to radical class politics. Indeed, demands to end capitalism and class society are often drowned out in some anarchist spaces, replaced instead by a politics of identity and guilt that mirrors a sort of “Oppression Olympics”, where identity becomes fetishized and separated from a radical class analysis and commitment to ending class society¹. *Black Flame* offers a reminder to us that anarchism is a part of the socialist movement and that a concern with social oppression without a commitment to ending class society is just liberalism that is sometimes dressed up in anarchist colors — albeit with some noble goals.

Secondly, Schmidt and van der Walt take this approach in order to demonstrate that anarchist histories have often been muddled due to past academic accounts of the anarchist tradition. Indeed, scholars often argued “that anyone who held an antistatist position must be an anarchist, even if they disagreed over fundamental issues like the nature of society, law, property, or the means of changing society” (17). Given this loose definition of anarchism, it provides a space for anti-state liberals like Murray Rothbard, a supporter of a stateless free market distopia, within the anarchist tradition. However, focusing on anarchism as an ideology based in historical social movements easily demonstrates that anarchism is, and has always been, a socialist philosophy with no room for “free” market ideas.

¹ Please note, I am not arguing that we should reject the politics of identity in favor of class politics, nor that class politics are any more “central” than struggles against other hierarchies. Rather, I would argue for an intersectional approach to politics that takes into account struggles around specific identities and the ways that they overlap and intersect with the struggle against capital and the state. That is, these fights against white supremacy, heteronormativity, patriarchy, capitalism, the state, etc. are not separate fights — they are one in the same and it is a mistake for anarchists to ignore any of them or to privilege some struggles over others.

One can see echoes of this problem in contemporary liberals who refer to themselves as “anarcho”-capitalists. Nevermind that capitalism requires the state to manage class antagonisms and, thus, the idea is preposterous to begin with. It is an insult to the history of anarchism and working class struggles to suggest that anarchism could somehow be compatible with a capitalist, “free” market worldview. To compound matters, there are likewise racists who have co-opted the label. Referring to themselves as “national anarchists” (as the Nazis famously appropriated the term “socialist” in “national socialist”), these racial separatists deserve as little space in the anarchist tradition as supporters of a stateless “free” market (which is to say, none at all). Schmidt and van der Walt outline a socialist anarchism, based in working class movements, that would provide no space within anarchism for the apostles of a hierarchical society — be they capitalists or racists.

Again, these are the major strengths of this approach — of locating anarchism within its history embedded in working class social movements.

However, this approach leads the authors to define anarchist thinkers like Proudhon out of the tradition. Proudhon had a major impact on the development of anarchism as a political philosophy and influenced such well-known revolutionary anarchists as Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin. Likewise, they exclude the individualist strain of anarchism, removing the likes of William Godwin, Benjamin Tucker, and Max Stirner — all of whom, it might be added, opposed capitalism and the state. However, with different focuses and, importantly, without *revolutionary*, commitments, Schmidt and van der Walt exclude them from their “broad anarchist tradition” due to *strategic* differences².

In my opinion, this is one of the weaknesses of this approach. Imagine, for example, a world in which Marxists were expected to

² It also leads to them defining Marxists like Daniel De Leon and James Connolly into anarchism.

agree on strategy or otherwise be defined out of the tradition. We would effectively lose a chunk of past Marxisms (e.g. those that arose in response to the rise of fascism in Europe like the Frankfurt School), we'd lose contemporary Marxists such as Hardt and Negri — indeed, much of contemporary Marxist thinking would no longer *be* Marxism.

For contemporary anarchism, this would remove all of the anarchists who argue for an “exodus” strategy out of capitalism from the tradition. That is, some anarchists (alongside many Marxists) have eschewed traditional revolutionary strategy in favor of attempting to create an exodus out of capitalism. This is an old tradition within anarchism, typically arguing for the creation of alternative institutions that, when nurtured, will some day replace capitalism and the state.

I have some objections to defining them out of anarchism. For example, many of these anarchists are able theorists and doubt the ability for a traditional capital “R” revolution to be successful in the modern era. Indeed, as history has moved forward, the state has become better and better armed with new weapons capable of massive destruction on a scale that was unimaginable in the days of anarchism’s early formation. Questioning whether or not an armed revolutionary struggle is possible in the modern era makes sense — and anarchists should be having these kinds of strategic debates among ourselves. Defining them out of the anarchist tradition removes a critical strategic voice from the tradition that has raised rational objections to traditional strategy³.

As well, it might even be a mistake to think of these different strategies as somehow *separate* and necessarily at odds with each other. If we are to overthrow capitalism, we do need replacements. Much of this infrastructure could come from mass movements,

³ This is not to suggest that I agree that revolution, in the traditional sense, is not possible. It seems to me that if we had popular support, there might not be a military to point those new weapons at us!

view that unions — built through daily struggles, a radically democratic practice, and popular education — are crucial levers of revolution, and can even serve as the nucleus of a free socialist order” (7). Indeed, this has been an accepted, if controversial, anarchist idea from its inception — though not all anarchists regarded unions as having that revolutionary potential (in fact, many anarchists argue that unions, being mediators between workers and capital, can ONLY serve a reformist role — an argument which the authors reject).

Likewise, they research and write about anarchist positions on national liberation struggles, race, gender, internationalism, armed action — this list could go on — all with painstaking research and detail. There is too much content to comment on in a single review. And, importantly, Schmidt and van der Walt do so paying critical attention to anarchism as an *international* movement, citing anarchists from as disparate places as Germany, Britain, China, Japan, Uruguay, and so on. The authors have done a great service to the anarchist community by drawing out these international ties and decentering the West within anarchism’s historical tradition showing that we are, indeed, an international movement and that the demands for socialism combined with freedom within anarchism are not limited to the West.

As a reviewer, it is common practice to recommend a book one finds valuable and interesting. If you have a passing interest in radical politics, get this book. If you have an interest in anarchism, get this book. If you are an anarchist already, whether you agree with the authors’ perspective or not, get this book. This is a thoroughly researched narrative of a political movement that promises freedom, equality, and social viability for us all.

Yours for a new world!

neighborhood assemblies, and worker’s councils developed in the process of a revolutionary struggle. This has always been a part of anarchist revolutionary strategy.

But, being anarchists, we will settle for nothing less than the demolition of *all* social hierarchies. Thus, things like rigid gender roles and norms, normative expectations around sexual practices, internalized racism, lack of social viability for the disabled, etc. must be swept into the dustbin of history with capitalism and the state as well. Some of these processes are going to require cultural and conceptual change, in addition to the institutional changes we seek in a revolutionary struggle. Anarchist free schools, spaces like infoshops, indymedia centers, and the like provide spaces for experimenting with new social and cultural forms. Through collective projects like these we get to experience non-hierarchical organization and culture in our bodies — demonstrating that other worlds are possible and introducing new ideas into our stifling, sick, and hierarchical culture. So, while mass organizing might be necessary for overturning the existing social order, our everyday lives must be transformed as well. Many counter-institutions that anarchists are currently building can serve as spaces for doing just that.

These are, however, in many ways rather minor points. After all, I agree with the authors that a line needs to be drawn between those who can rightfully be called “anarchists” and those who have no business using the label. As I mentioned before, I would exclude capitalists and racists, for example. Anyone who espouses a classing of society, private ownership of productive property, or support for social hierarchies like sexism or racism has no place in the anarchist tradition. I would, however, personally argue for a broader “broad anarchist tradition” than the authors.

So, with the good and bad that comes from defining the broad anarchist tradition this way, Schmidt and van der Walt set about the rather large task of writing a history of what they see as the two traditions within anarchism: mass and insurrectionist anarchisms.

According to the authors, mass anarchism and insurrectionist anarchism can be differentiated thusly:

Mass anarchism stresses that only mass movements can create a revolutionary change in society, that such movements are typically built through struggles around immediate issues and reforms (whether concerning wages, police brutality, high prices, and so on), and that anarchists must participate in such movements to radicalise and transform them into levers of revolutionary change. What is critical is that reforms are won *from below*; these victories must be distinguished from reforms applied from above, which undermine popular movements.

The insurrectionist approach, in contrast, claims that reforms are illusory, that movements like unions are willing or unwitting bulwarks of the existing order, and that formal organizations are authoritarian. Consequently, insurrectionist anarchism emphasises armed action-“propaganda by the deed” – as the most important means of evoking a spontaneous revolutionary upsurge. (20)

Schmidt and van der Walt argue for the consistency of the mass anarchist approach. Indeed, the authors outline how “the insurrectional act was increasingly seen as elitist; rather than inspiring the working class and peasantry to action, at best it reinforced the passive reliance of the masses on leaders and saviors from above, substituting a self-elected vanguard for the popular classes” (133). Thus, the preferred strategy in *Black Flame* is one of patient organization, fighting for immediate demands while continuing to push for a future world without rulers, bosses, workers and slaves – that is, mass anarchism.

Schmidt and van der Walt also outline what they see as the best way for a militant minority in social movements, as anarchists are, to fight for this future world. It is through *organizational dualism* that anarchists can have the most impact in social movements. This means that anarchists would belong to anarchist specific organizations based on some common agreements and principles, as well as to social movement organizations. It is from mass social movements that revolution might come, and it is the revolutionary anarchist organization that argues within those mass movements for such a revolutionary rupture. In addition anarchists would argue for organizing those social movements in ways that *prefigure* the kind of world that anarchists want to create (e.g. democratic, egalitarian, non-hierarchical).

The question, then, that the authors pose is how much level of agreement and unity in tactics and theory should exist *within* the anarchist organization? Schmidt and van der Walt make a case for platformism, or organizing the specific organization around theoretical and tactical unity in a very tight and disciplined sense (although allowing for different “tendencies” within the organization). One can see the contemporary forebears of dual organizationalism in non-platformist groups like the Workers Solidarity Alliance (in the US and Canada) and the groups affiliated with the neo-platformist *anarkismo* project⁴ like NEFAC (Northeast Federation of Anarchist Communists – USA), the WSM (Workers Solidarity Movement – Ireland), and the ZACF (Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front – South Africa, of which the authors are members)⁵.

Throughout this well-researched history, Schmidt and van der Walt touch on many other important issues within the anarchist milieu. They argue against the notion that syndicalism is somehow separate from anarchist communism, defining syndicalism as “the

⁴ www.anarkismo.net

⁵ workersolidarity.org; nefac.net; www.wsm.ie; www.zabalaza.net