

Lucien van der Walt interview

Freedom Press

January 2012

Lucien van der Walt was interviewed for the London-based “Freedom” anarchist newspaper back in 2011, the interview appearing in the January 2012 print edition. The paper was founded in 1886 by the exiled Piotr Kropotkin (!) and others as “A Journal of Anarchist Socialism” and had a fairly continuous print-run into 2014 when it went online only.

The first thing that strikes you about Lucien van der Walt, co-author of “Black Flame the Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism,” is that he is serious about his subject. Not only does he know what he’s talking about, he invests his conversation with a warmth and enthusiasm for anarchism and syndicalism, and anarchists, that is refreshing to say the least.

The antithesis of the cynical snarling ranter, van der Walt comes across as someone keen to communicate the powerful global history and impact, the benefits and indeed the contemporary relevance of the anarchist tradition.

Perhaps that’s why the book, which started as a small collaborative effort, turned into a monster 500-page heavyweight.

“It was originally a sort of pamphlet, we wrote a pamphlet on ‘what is anarchism?’ it had Spain and we mentioned Makhno and we thought let’s add a bit, and we kicked this thing around and about 2005 we had a book, in various forms.”

He is telling me this as we stand freezing in the cold December weather in the alley of Whitechapel’s notorious White Hart pub. Van der Walt has just given a talk at Freedom Bookshop, where he covered aspects of anarchism not often given an airing. For those of us brought up on Emma Goldman and Prince Kropotkin, it was a pleasure to listen to someone speak with equal passion about Korean anarchist history and the popularity of South American anarchism – indeed the more obscure the anarchist the more he seemed to relish providing us with information about them. He clearly loves his subject.

So who is the man behind one of the most significant anarchist texts published in recent years?

“I grew up in a declining mining town in apartheid South Africa, at the end of it. My father had been a miner and then he moved up to become a teacher, and I got really politicised when I went to university and was involved the anti-apartheid student movement.

“In the late 1990s there were a lot of big campaigns around privatisation partly at universities around outsourcing, and partly in the black communities around electricity cut-offs, cost recovery, prepaid meters, things like that. And these things came together to form the Anti-Privatisation Forum in 2000, I was a founder member of that and the media officer. But I probably identified myself with the anarchist movement by 1994. I was involved in some of the early anarchist groups like the Workers Solidarity Federation.”

South Africa in 1990s was politically in a massive state of flux, and to be an anarchist within that environment, without the equivalent social scene and lifestyle attributes of European or North American anarchism, must have been challenging.

“It was also an opportunity. There was no baggage, but hard challenges. Anyone who was a militant had to face the question of how does your movement relate to the existing mass movements? You’re talking about a period of massive class struggle, you’re talking about a very complicated transition from apartheid, but in many ways a partial, yet painfully incomplete, victory for the national liberation struggle of oppressed African coloured and Indian people -how do you relate to that movement?

“If you are going to go anywhere you’ve got to relate to that, you’ve got to relate specifically to the black working class majority, the heartlands of union and community work. South Africa is capitalist, has massive inequalities, deeply shaped by colonial roots and national oppression. So through hard debates, the emergent anarchist movement was defined by first the black working class orientation, anarchism has to be a movement of the black working class, in the trade unions, in the townships. The idea was to build clear anarchist militants in the trade unions and in the social movements.”

Although he comes with an impressive intellectual pedigree (professor of sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg) it is telling van der Walt was an active political militant which informed his developing relationship to anarchism, especially in the 90s.

“There was no real anarchist movement, a number of reading groups and discussion groups popped up and there were a number of debates. There had been some sort of loose anarchist groups before in Johannesburg, but myself I came out of the student movement which means I came, to some extent, out of the mainstream struggle tradition in South Africa, which is the Communist Party and the ANC. The ANC was this huge thing in the early 90s – Mandela got released, but it was also a very turbulent time, it was a time when you could go on a march with 200,000 people and see the working class fucking moving, and that was very formative for me, and that’s how I got politicised and moved eventually to anarchism.”

The authors of “Black Flame” have been described as doing ‘a remarkable job in drawing together a vast international body of literature. They show convincingly that anarchism and syndicalism were far more significant political forces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century world than historians have generally given them credit for’.

It is the sheer scope and attention to detail that gives the book its authority, but van der Walt admits it came out of an attempt to orientate their own limited anarchist traditions historically.

“We had no reference points, there were no older comrades to explain things to us but there was also no baggage, we had to rediscover anarchism for ourselves. And ‘Black Flame’ is partly coming out of that. It’s our own engagement with anarchism and understanding it, and the things we had to learn like strategy and tactical debates and the history of anarchism, especially the history of anarchism outside of Europe, and especially the history of anarchism [in] how it dealt with issues like class, race and gender.”

“Class is obvious but how do you deal with race in a colonial context? Where does the third world fit in? So it was partly around that, and that’s partly where it comes from. Before anarchism can engage in other intellectual traditions it must know its own tradition.”

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