

Egypt's Black Bloc

The Arrival of Anarchism in the Middle East?

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December 8, 2013

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The Egyptian Black Bloc is not the first example of anarchism in Egypt.

When in January 2013, Egyptian protesters commemorated the two-year anniversary of Hosni Mubarak's ouster, a mysterious group emerged in Cairo. Protesting against the Morsi regime, the newly-formed anarchist "Black Bloc" openly declared they would not eschew violence to realize their goals.

Using slogans, including "our mess prevents chaos" and "we are confusion that prevents confusion," their protests prompted a violent crackdown by the Egyptian regime, and an excited reaction from anarchist groups abroad.

When we look at coverage of the Black Bloc in the "anarchist blogosphere," the dominant tone is one of celebration. When the Black Bloc first appeared, the jubilant blogs quickly stressed the connection between Egyptian revolutionaries and Western anarchist movements such as Occupy.

A Long History of Anarchism and Anti-Authoritarian Activism

Moreover, the emergence of the Black Bloc was hailed as the "arrival of anarchism in the Middle East." The blogs — and, to a lesser extent, some of the mainstream press — give us the impression that the Black Bloc is Egypt's first-ever encounter with anarchism and anti-authoritarianism.

This is, however, far from true. While it is certainly less documented than anarchist history in the West, the Middle East — and Egypt in particular — has a long history of anarchism and anti-authoritarian activism.

Anarchism in the region started as early as the 1860s when Italian political refugees and dissidents arrived in Alexandria and other Egyptian cities, where they found the political climate to be less repressive. Soon, the new immigrant communities were flourishing. The newcomers became increasingly active in domestic politics, set up workers' unions, and influenced the burgeoning Egyptian labor movements with anti-authoritarian ideas.

Much of these immigrants' version of anarchism — and specifically anarcho-syndicalism, which focuses on labor struggles through self-organization — was about fighting the corrupted regime and improving the lives of ordinary Egyptians. These ideas found fertile soil with Egyptian workers.

In 1894, Greek workers organized a strike with Egyptians laborers against the Suez Canal Company. This strike was characterized by an unprecedented degree of unity between foreign and indigenous activists, which resulted from a convergence of the immigrant workers' political radicalism and Egyptian workers' nationalist sympathies.

This anti-authoritarian activism of the increasingly powerful workers' unions inevitably led to more state repression of anarchists, while several foreign activists were deported. However, it also led to more public sympathy for these revolutionaries, whom many Egyptians understood to be fighting a corrupt regime on behalf of the average Egyptian citizen.

The Labor Movement, Egyptian Nationalism, and British Occupation

The workers' activism went hand in hand with an upsurge in Egyptian nationalism. While the latter was an *Egyptian* ideology by nature, the immigrant anarchists supported the nationalist cause and became actively involved. It was this entwinement of the labor movement and

the nationalist ideology that worried the British, and that led General Allenby to comment in July 1919 that: “The foreign and native working classes have apparently identified in their own minds the Syndicalist (that is trade union) movement, and the Extremist (that is the nationalist agitation).”

Even though the British granted Egypt official independence in 1923, their military occupation of Egypt lasted until 1936. However, the 1919 national revolution against the British had opened the floodgates of labor organization, nationalist activism, and anti-authoritarian action. For years to come, anarchist activists kept targeting foreign powers repeatedly, and their militant actions continued to enjoy steady popular support.

While anti-authoritarianism and anarchism along with Egyptian nationalism remained the dominant mode of expression for Egyptian political activists during the 1930s and 1940s, the anarchist/anti-authoritarian creed, along with any other political ideology that would compete with Nasserism, was side-lined during the heyday of pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s.

However, its legacy still resonates with revolutionaries today. As a contemporary Egyptian anarchist illustrates in an interview, at least some of the current anti-authoritarian activism was inspired by Egyptian anarchist activity in the 1940s.

Far From a Historical Novelty

As we can see, anti-authoritarianism and anarchist tactics are far from new to Egyptian society. However, the Western anarchists’ reactions to the emergence of the Black Bloc, their celebration of its adoption of “Western anarchist tactics,” and their disregard of Egypt’s rich history of anarchism and anti-authoritarian rebellion, display an Orientalist tendency to gloss over the efforts and agency of indigenous actors.

Western anarchist blogs have waxed lyrical about the significance of the Black Bloc, projecting onto it all sorts of politics, objectives and contexts for which little or no evidence exists. They suggest that the Bloc is somehow part of a worldwide anarchist network with a common purpose and vision. However, by trying to fit the Black Bloc to their own agenda, they deny the specific characteristics of this Egyptian revolutionary movement, and the context in which it has emerged.

Egypt’s Black Bloc grew out of the struggle for liberation from an authoritarian system, and its mission has on several occasions been stated as the fight against the authoritarian regime — be that the Morsi government or the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

The first clip that the movement posted on YouTube showed young men waving black banners emblazoned with the international anarchy sign, the letter A in a circle. Black Bloc members have also been known to wear balaclavas and Guy Fawkes masks at their protests.

Judging from these superficial symbols, it might indeed seem that the Black Bloc identifies with broader anarchist movements like Occupy. However, it is important not to read too much into these outward appearances and logos.

Ideology or Tactical Pragmatism?

As its numerous statements, social media declarations and interviews show, there is hardly anything conclusive about the politics of Egyptian Black Bloc participants. In fact, one of the few

things it does indicate is that the Black Bloc revolutionaries do not share too much in the way of vision with their Western anarchist counterparts.

Their emergence has been responsive, borne out of specific political circumstances, and they represent a *tactic*, not a particularly anarchist ideology. In fact, their message has been mostly reform-oriented, evocative of a constitutional liberal position, and has echoed what one finds coming from any number of revolutionary groups in Egypt.

While their tactics and militant actions may be anarchist in nature, Black Bloc's ultimate aim is not about a stateless society or non-hierarchical self-governance. Rather, as my recent interview with a leading Black Bloc member illustrates, their goals very much involve the institution of a state. "We want a state that is a product of the revolution, where everybody can be free, not a secret, repressive state, but a state that provides a better future."

These anarchists are not dogmatic purists obsessed with hierarchical structures or complete collectivism. They are realists and pragmatists, and their immediate goal is to improve the situation of the Egyptian people. As the aforementioned activist said to me: "If Egypt would be a secular state, and this state would give my kids food and education, equality and healthcare and peace, we would be ok with that."

These statements illustrate that the objectives of contemporary Egyptian anarchists of the Black Bloc fit in very well with the historical context of anarchism in Egypt. The struggles of the anti-authoritarian revolutionaries in the late 19th/early 20th century were responsive in nature as well, borne out of a historically specific state of affairs. For all their ideological foundations, in practice those struggles also focused on improving living and working conditions for the people, rather than aiming to establish a completely self-governed stateless society.

When we take a close look at modern Egyptian history, it seems that the Black Bloc is far from a historical novelty but just another example of anti-authoritarian struggle in a country that is, in fact, quite experienced with these matters. Moreover, to focus exclusively on the Black Bloc as the sole representative of anarchism in Egypt is to gloss over other, equally meaningful, initiatives in Egyptian society.

If we borrow Noam Chomsky's "definition" of anarchism — namely that it is an "orientation against relations of domination and toward relations of equality, democracy and cooperation" — we can accept that all activity which undermines the repressive hegemonic structures that dominate society can be defined as "anarchist activity."

This means that not only is the Black Bloc not the first anarchist group in Egyptian history, it is neither currently the only one. If we go by Chomsky's explanation of anarchism, we have to realize there are groups and individuals currently active in Egypt whose efforts and small struggles on a daily basis are anarchist in nature. These individuals may not wear black hoodies or balaclavas, but they are fighting a repressive system as much as the Black Bloc does.

Fight Against Hegemony

Think, for example, of the efforts of organizations like Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment. While they do not concern themselves with the creation of stateless societies or political hierarchies, they certainly fight against a repressive (patriarchal) hegemony. Not only do they physically protect women from sexual assault during protests, they also vehemently reject the imposition on women's clothes, looks, whereabouts or lifestyle in order to avoid sexual assault.

Hence, they fight the system in practice as well as in theory. If anarchism entails opposing authority or hierarchical organization in the conduct of human relations (including, but not limited to, the state system), surely opposing the dominant hierarchy of values that currently attributes more influence, authority and freedom to men than to women is a quintessentially anarchist battle.

Many of the men and women involved in Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment may have never read the writings of Mikhail Bakunin or Emma Goldman. Yet they personify all that anti-authoritarianism essentially stands for. Nonetheless, their efforts have been excluded from the dominant Western anarchist discourse because they do not fit within its “narrow and complex definitions, labels, and lifestyle.”

This does not only fail to do justice to the efforts and achievements of these “every-day revolutionaries,” it is also detrimental to our own understanding of the complexities of anti-authoritarianism in Egypt.

The one-sided representation of the events currently unfolding in the Egyptian revolutionary arena holds up a mirror to our own shortcomings. It exposes Western anarchist commentators – and some of the mainstream media pundits – as historically unaware, Orientalist in outlook, and more concerned with form and flags than with understanding the real context of Egyptian anarchism.

Even if their generalizations stem from some romantic notion of shared struggle and brotherhood in battle, ultimately it drowns out the specific *Egyptian* anarchist discourse. If we really want to understand the Black Bloc, the Egyptian revolutionary groups or even the revolution itself, we need to learn not to speak for Egyptians, but to listen to them.

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