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Anarchism and Its Misunderstanders

On supply chains and buried history

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This week I've been researching Mexican labor history, preparing for an episode of my podcast that includes Ricardo Flores Magón, probably the most influential Mexican anarchist. Since his organization predated most of the rest of the revolutionaries of the Mexican Revolution, his name and legacy have been recuperated heavily by the Mexican government.¹ His anarchism, of course, has been largely left out of the conversation. It can't be completely removed though, no matter how they try—the Magonistas (a name he hated) were anarchists and they weren't subtle about it.

Thirty-five years before he came onto the scene, something else of note happened. First, in 1865, anarchist textile workers in Mexico City at two factories went on strike. This gets referred to as Mexico's first strike (though we'll talk about that). They were brutally repressed, with soldiers firing into the crowd. Second, years later, in Tlalnepantla (a city quite

¹ Source: Dreams of Freedom: A Ricardo Flores Magon Reader

nearby, now part of the Mexico City metropolitan area), anarchist women from several factories went on strike and won, the first successful strike in Mexican history.²

Every time someone claims something is the first strike, or the longest trial in a country's history, or any other superlative like that, I'm skeptical, so usually I try to look it up. There was a silver miner strike in the city of Real de Monte in 1766. I suppose that was technically New Spain, not Mexico. The Real de Monte strike gets called the first labor strike in North American history. Lots of things get called the first thing.

But those textile workers *were* the birth of the modern Mexican labor movement, which predictably opened in a hail of gunfire from the government. It's also not shocking to me that it was organized by anarchists. Around the same time, indigenous folks, anarchists, and indigenous anarchists started a wave of agrarian revolt that terrorized the landed elite and redistributed land to dispossessed peasants.³

I read history books for a living, and my biases come through in the topics and books I pick (leaning towards anarchism, leaning towards direct action, leaning towards mutual aid, leaning towards anticolonial struggle, leaning towards feminism). I try to be aware of those biases, but I'm still left with the overwhelming realization that anarchists were everywhere in the second half of the 19th century, and in most countries, anarchist socialism (that is, a socialist movement that advocates against the creation of a new state, but instead to organize society horizontally) was the predominant form of socialism, often even outnumbering more reform-minded socialists, what we might call today democratic socialists.

² Source: Nineteenth Century Urban Labor Precursors of the Mexican Revolution: The Development of an Ideology

³ Source: Anarchism in Latin America

The answer to “how would anarchist society handle the following,” is “we will organize in such a way that those who are most capable of answering that question will be able to get together and answer it.” I don't mean this as a vague platitude, I mean it concretely. When workers control a factory, for example, rather than the stockholders, efficiency is increased, pay is increased, working conditions improve, and hours are shorter. In an anarchist society, the people who know how to make and distribute medicine will be able to meet and discuss how to produce better medicine more efficiently, and there would not be the monetary barrier between a patient and her meds, nor the national barrier between a researcher and her peers.

When we say “we don't know what an anarchist society would be like because we are not yet in one,” we are not being vague or evasive. We are saying that societies ought to be constructed by the people in them. Anarchism is a set of tools and principles with which to construct societies that value freedom and cooperation. We actually *do* have examples of what those societies can look like, but where we are at now, and where we will be in the future, is not revolutionary Catalonia, Ukraine during the Russian Civil War, or Korean Manchuria. We should not expect to reach the same answers as they did, even if we apply similar problem-solving methods to our problems.

We draw from history—not just from the history of self-styled anarchists like those examples above, but the lived experiences of people who are from cultures that are not traditionally state societies or capitalist. We draw from history to write our present, and to prepare to collectively write our future.

sent out to where it needs to go. There is some truth to that. Then there's off-grid life, where power has to be generated and stored locally. When I lived off-grid, relying on solar, it became very clear just how inefficient that system is. Power is only generated when the sun is out, so I have to store it in batteries that are not only expensive to buy, but they're ecologically destructive to produce.

Wouldn't it be better, then, to have a grid? That isn't necessarily centralization. Where I live now, I have solar again. This time, it's grid-tied solar. I produce electricity on my roof that goes into the grid for other people to use. When the sun isn't out, I draw from the grid. The grid can be—and to an extent already is—a distributed system rather than a centralized one. Of course, I also find it valuable to have backup systems for when the grid isn't available, and micro-grids serving individual areas are a good redundancy or even main source of power, depending on the specific needs of a community.

People think of government as the grid and anarchism as the off-grid cabin. This is the crux of the misunderstanding. Anarchists seek to distribute power, in every sense of the word, not just to localize it. This isn't to say an off-grid cabin (again, the metaphorical one) is counter to anarchism, but it's not how most people would choose to live. Anarchism is presenting a mesh of overlapping, distributed systems. Some of those systems, in order to share, require certain standards (I can't put DC electricity into the grid, for example). Not everywhere needs to be solar, not everything needs to be wind-powered. Diverse systems can work together to shore up each other's weaknesses. Overall, we could probably do with an awful lot less reliance on electrical power, but most of us see the utility in keeping it around.

Anarchism is capable of presenting answers to questions about supply chains and manufacturing, but those answers are also not, quite, what anarchism is. **Anarchism is not a set of answers. It's a set of tools with which to find answers.**

The revolutionary Left was heavily anarchist or heavily anarchist influenced until the turn of the century, or in many countries, until the Russian Civil War that the Bolsheviks emerged victorious from. (I don't have it in me to call it the Bolshevik revolution. It was a pluralistic revolution waged by multiple socialist tendencies that the Bolsheviks took over through the large-scale murder of their fellow revolutionaries. Yes I'm a salty old anarchist bitch. Yes, that still feels like the most accurate way to describe what happened.)

Yet you'd never know that anarchists have been everywhere and had their hands in everything if you read any mainstream history—whether that history is produced by a capitalist country or a state socialist country. Sure, some of our names live on—Ricardo Flores Magón, for example, as a revolutionary leader. And Spain, Ukraine, and Korea in particular are unable to entirely bury our memory. But every piece of culture and history from the past 150 years or so that I've looked into is full of anarchists. My other work is in fiction, and early on I realized that you've got Aldous Huxley, Ursula le Guin, Oscar Wilde, Michael Moorcock, Franz Kafka, Henry Miller, Anthony Burgess, Joe Haldeman. Household names (depending on the household). None of them famous for their affiliations with anarchism.

Anarchist refugees from Spain were among the fiercest partisans fighting in France, and it was anarchists in tanks with names like Durruti and Don Quixote who first rolled into Paris during the liberation from the Nazis in 1944.⁴

Our history is buried.

Anarchism isn't the only buried history, of course. I have to put in an incredible amount of effort to figure out what the women were doing in any given social struggle, because we were always there and our names are never written down. Even that first successful strike in Mexico, by anarchist textile

⁴ Source: The anarchists who liberated Paris, and why they did it

workers? The women's names aren't recorded, but instead that of some man who was involved with organizing them. Luisa Quevedo was one of three anarchists who, in 1869, made their way to Chiapas in Mexico to give arms training to the peasants there, whose movement inspired the revolutionary leader Zapata and therefore the later Zapatistas who inspire so many today... yet she's mentioned in history as the wife of another anarchist.

God forbid you want to find out how anyone in history related to queerness or sex work. Even among diehard revolutionaries, for a long time it was hard to get people to admit "yeah that guy liked fucking other dudes" or "this lady made her money the old-fashioned way." Even though the first magazine for gay men in the world (there we go with "first" again) was published by a German anarchist named Adolph Brand.

And since so many of us anarchists were queer, and likely so many of us were sex workers (the deepest buried of all histories), we're harder still to find. Magnus Hirschfeld, the pioneering social scientist who explored LGBT issues in Wiemar Germany (who later had to flee the Nazis who burned his research), he wasn't an anarchist, but he had this to say about us: "In the ranks of a relatively small party, the anarchist, it seemed to me as if proportionately more homosexuals and effeminates are found than in others." He meant that as a compliment and we'll take it as one.

The burial of our history has more effects than I know how to count. One effect is how often we reinvent the wheel—learning the hard way over and over again which allies we can trust and which intend to murder us, learning the hard way over and over again the strengths and weaknesses of collective decisionmaking, learning the hard way over and over again what is involved in organizing revolutionary activity at scale.

Another effect, the main one I want to talk about right now, is that people just don't know about us. They don't know what we're about. They hear the name "anarchist" and they

and how the black flag and the black and red flag set a fire under me when I was 19, a fire that hasn't gone out yet. But every political label is misunderstood and misappropriated and has been probably forever. In 19th century Europe, "republican" meant "anti-king" and bordered on socialist and anarchist. In the 19th century United States, "republican" meant "anti-slavery and willing to start a war over the issue." These days, "republican" means "watches too much Fox News."

I bristle at the sorts of questions like "how would medication be manufactured and distributed in anarchism?" These questions can be asked in good faith, and if they are, they deserve an answer. But usually the undertone of the question is "it would not be, and therefore by advocating for anarchism you're advocating against life-saving medicine."

Most of the askers wouldn't be able to describe to you how medication is manufactured and distributed in our current system, or how it was in Soviet Russia. It's not the kind of specialized knowledge that the average person has. The cheeky answer that occurs to me first is of course "well it doesn't work very well now either, now does it?"

But the original question itself shows a misunderstanding of anarchism (which is, again, an understandable misunderstanding). Anarchism does not generally argue against the manufacture and distribution of medicine. It is not "corporations" that make medicine, not "governments" that develop international standards for safety. It is people who do both of those things. People embedded within organizational structures.

Someone asked me recently what we would do about the power grid. It feels like such a good example that it actually becomes a sort of metaphor for anarchism. People tend to conceptualize the power grid as a centralized source of electricity

When that guy I don't like very much, Proudhon, declared himself an anarchist in 1840, it was a bit like saying "I am a terrorist." At least based on the connotations of the word anarchist at the time. But he also meant it directly and clearly, saying "as man seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy." (The reason I don't like him very much is that when he said "man," he literally meant men and was excluding women. Other anarchists immediately and rightly took him to task about his misogyny.)

I can't really blame people for misunderstanding anarchism. Whenever people on both sides argue "no, anarchy means this" or "no, anarchy means that," I want to just shout "did you know that words have more than one meaning depending on context and who is saying them?" It's perfectly understandable for people to view anarchism as advocacy for anarchy, defined most commonly by society as "an absence of government and order" or whatever. This is not a historically defensible definition of anarchism, as a political position, but it's perfectly understandable for people to assume it must be based on what they've learned growing up.

Anarchists have tried to address this problem in numerous ways. One is rebranding. The other word for anarchist with the most widespread adoption is probably "libertarian socialist." There's an appeal to this; it's specific. We are socialists—that is, we believe that the means of production should be distributed fairly. We also are the opposite of authoritarian socialists, which makes us libertarian. The problem is, to half of the US, "libertarian" means "capitalist" and to the other half, "socialist" means "authoritarian." So it doesn't really compute. (Early on, people used "socialism" and "anarchism" interchangeably, because authoritarian socialism is by and large a later development. We started adding "libertarian" to set ourselves apart from those we disagreed with about authority.)

I'm not interested in rebranding, though. I just believe in outreach. Maybe I'm too caught up in how the word anarchism

will come to certain conclusions, based on what they've told or what they've personally considered about "a society without government." If we're lucky, it'll be based on what they've seen of us. Or rather, what they've seen that they *know* was us.

The tip of the anarchist iceberg is different in different times and places, but it's always just the tip. For a long time, the public knew us by our assassins, who brought heads of state to early graves. Other times, the public saw us just as rabble rousers, looking to stir people up for the sake of it. More recently, we were most known for the black bloc, for rioting at protests. Sometimes, we're known for our mutual aid projects—and among other protest organizations and the progressive left, we're sometimes known for our skill as organizers and facilitators and medics.

Overall, though, we're known for riots. Assassinations. Bombs. Destruction. Which have been a part of our history, but only part of it. This ties neatly into one of the largest problems we run across: people don't realize that anarchism is an umbrella term for a group of coherent and specific political and social theories and practices. They think it just means "the government is gone now, good luck." The most visible aspects of anarchism don't always inform anyone that we stand for anything else.

One time I gave a talk about anarchism and fiction in Portland, about ten years after that city had seen a militant series of anti-war protests against the second Iraq War. One person asked the question, basically, "why do you anarchists always show up and fuck up our protests?"

I had a more concrete answer than usual that day, because I'd been heavily involved in the organizing of the specific protests he was referring to. The answer to his question was, simply, that those protests had been organized by anarchists—or with heavy anarchist involvement—in the first place. Those who saw anarchists as "outsiders" to those protests clearly

hadn't been involved in their organization. To be clear, most of the anarchist organizers weren't 20-year-olds wearing black masks, but most of us were in solidarity with the black bloc. (Well, I was a 20-year-old in a black mask during the time I helped organize those protests, but I wasn't a central organizer by a long shot.) The question I could have asked that man in response would be "why did you show up at a protest intended to disrupt society enough to stop a war and expect no one to do anything disruptive?"

But again, we're only known for the tip of the iceberg.

The first anarchist I met was in my boy scout troop. At least, I think he was an anarchist. He was the cool older punk guy, maybe 17 years old. He lived in his mom's basement, which is cool when you're 17, and he had Black Flag CDs and Guns & Roses shirts. There was a pool table in that basement with a bed sheet over it that covered an inordinate amount of car stereos. These were, presumably, stolen.

I had no idea that anarchism was a political ideology. I don't know if this 17-year-old did either. I had that "the government is gone, good luck" understanding of anarchism. I was 13, so that version of anarchism appealed to me. I asked him the big important question about anarchism: "when you draw a circle-A, do the lines break out of the circle or no?"

He gave me the correct answer.

"It doesn't matter."

I didn't stay interested in anarchism throughout most of my teens, because—as I saw it—I was too rational to gravitate towards extremes. I settled on a lackluster appreciation for social democracy and the Green party, but it didn't set a fire under me.

Nothing political did until, at 19, in 2002, I met anarchists. I met the black-clad protestors who were dead set on putting their bodies on the line to stop the neoliberal agenda that was stripping the developing world of resources and leaving bodies in its wake. The protestors had a coherent political ideology

and a coherent political method. It appealed to me. I haven't looked back.

I'm not here to convince the reader to become an anarchist, however. I'm here to say that fundamentally, most discussions between anarchists and non-anarchists involve both parties talking about two different and unrelated ideas. Most, but not all, people critical of anarchism are not arguing against the political ideology that I or millions before me have espoused. They aren't arguing against a free association of cooperative, autonomous groups who federate with one another in order to build an antiracist, antipatriarchal society based on mutual aid and mutual respect. They're arguing against "no rules."

Some of those arguments are in good faith. Others are not.

Anarchism is an umbrella term for an assortment of specific and identifiable ideological positions. That is to say, anarchism is not a vague thing. It's a complex thing, it's an organic thing, and it's an ideology against ideology, but it is still a specific and identifiable thing. When I say, for example, "anarchist capitalists are not anarchists" I mean to say that capitalism is entirely outside the bounds of what has been identified historically as anarchism as a coherent movement. Anarchism, as part of the larger umbrella of socialism (another misunderstood word), was specifically developed to oppose capitalism. Anti-capitalism is at least as central to anarchist theory and practice as anti-statism is.

This isn't to say I advocate for tight definitions and bounds on anarchism. We fight for, as the Zapatistas would put it (who are not anarchists but with whom we have engaged in mutual discussion, support, and respect for decades) "a world in which many worlds are possible."

Anarchism is a scary word for very kind people. We picked an aggressive name. It has always been a bit of a provocation.