KDVS Interview with Lucien van der Walt, co-author of "Black Flame"

Interview with co-author of "Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism"

Richard Estes and Ron Glick

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The interview covers issues like defining anarchism, anarchism and trade unions today, the issue of centralisation, anarchism and globalisation then and now, the Soviet Union and Communism, the Spanish Civil War, anarchism and immigration today, the relationship between class struggle and other forms of oppression, anarchism after Seattle, and anarchism and postmodernism.

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The transcript (edited slightly for clarity) is below.

And thanks to Richard and Ron, who have interviewed several AK authors and collective members on their show.

RICHARD ESTES: Our first guest today is LUCIEN VAN DER WALT. He is based at the University of Witwatersrand…rand….srand…excuse me, Witwatersrand. Is that right?

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Witwatersrand.

RICHARD ESTES: … Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He teaches, you teach, Development, Economic Sociology and Labour Studies. The reason I invited you to be on the air with us today is because several months ago I had the opportunity to encounter your book that you co-authored with Michael Schmidt, who's a Johannesburg-based investigative journalist, entitled *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism.*

RON GLICK: I just want to say that this is the first time that we've had a live guest from Africa on this programme, which is very exciting.

RICHARD ESTES: It is a first and, in this instance, it is also, I think, noteworthy… Anarchism is something that I think, in terms of the general public perception and understanding, in comparison to other political values and ideas, is not well understood and not well defined in the public

consciousness. So, for that reason, I wanted to have you on the air today because I thought your book was extraordinarily well-timed and provides a context for people to engage the subject and to evaluate their own political values in comparison to it. I enjoyed the book very much for that reason. So, thanks for making some time available—and I also want to note that you are also up back in South Africa and I think it's 2am, is that right?

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Ja, no, it's around about then.

RICHARD ESTES: So…

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: But thanks for having me on the show, no problem at all.

[DEFINING ANARCHISM AND SYNDICALISM]

RICHARD ESTES: The first thing I want to ask you, because it's one of the primary subjects of the book, is sort of a simple question…what is it that you believe to be anarchism, and what, in your view, do you consider to be improperly described as anarchism?

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Well, as you know, the whole idea of "anarchism," the whole word, has gathered a lot of connotations over time which have obscured people's ability to understand it. I mean, in the public mind in the States I imagine it's pretty similar to a lot of other English-speaking countries: anarchism is seen as chaos, disorder, and so on. But once you get beyond that, there's a whole lot of things that get thrown into a bit of a grab-bag called anarchism.

Now when you look closely at anarchism, to understand what its core ideas are, you have to look at its history, you have to look at when it emerges. And when you look at its emergence, you have to go back to the 1860s, you find it emerging in the union movement, the workers' movement, in the socialist movement.

So to answer your question about what we see as anarchism, and this is the central argument in our book, we would understand anarchism as a movement that aimed, through struggle, to create a free, stateless, socialist society based on cooperation and mutual aid, a movement that sees the motor of history as the struggle of ordinary people, working-class people, just ordinary folks, peasants, small farmers…trying to create that world across borders internationally.

That would be the basics of it—a class struggle-based, socialist movement, libertarian in its aims, libertarian in its message, trying to create a sort of a free cooperative, socialist order.

Now, the thing is, "anarchism," besides the label of chaos and so on, has been used a lot in the academy—and I think this is one of the problems it faces in its perception as compared to, say, Marxism or liberalism—it has been used in the academy to relate to a whole bunch of quite unrelated doctrines ranging from the ideas of Max Stirner, who was an extreme individualist, all the way through to various fairly abstruse philosophies around individual autonomy and so on. I don't know…does that answer you?

RICHARD ESTES: It just seems to me, that with Marxism you have Marx. So like…

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Right…

RON GLICK: …so like there's this person you can point to. With totalitarianism: Hanna Arendt, and with anarchism? With fascism, Mussolini, and with anarchism there isn't…certainly, I don't know where you exactly point to. You also have in the title of the book "syndicalism." Maybe you could define that for us as well?

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Alright, before I get onto that, let me say that if you were looking for your, say, Marx or Engels of anarchism, I think you'd have to look at Mikhail Bakunin, and you'd have to look at Peter Kropotkin. So Bakunin and Kropotkin would be the two main figures.

These would be the two key figures; the key influences on the movement; the people who really…articulate and express and codify a lot of its doctrine. This is not to say that they invented everything—they never claimed to. They codified a lot of ideas that were out there, expressed them; acted as the sort of mouthpiece of the movement. Those would be the two big guys…the *Big Two*.

Now, in terms of "syndicalism," right, syndicalism at a minimum means the idea of a revolutionary trade union movement. The idea of syndicalism was that you could essentially use trade unions, rather than the state, rather than political parties, rather than some small group of guerrillas running around the mountains in berets. Actual unions, run by ordinary people in their workplaces, to bring about this new anarchist society.

So in that sense, syndicalism, the idea of revolutionary trade unionism, is a strategy, a strategy developed *within* the anarchist movement, a strategy that was there from the start.

But, partly because of the connotations attached to anarchism, partly because there is a bit of a tendency, in a lot of the literature, in a lot of activist milieu, in a lot of the union movement, to see syndicalism as something altogether different to anarchism, we've had to single out the words a bit there, "anarchism" and "syndicalism," *but* we see syndicalism as part of a broad anarchist tradition.

[TRADE UNIONISM AND ANARCHISM TODAY]

RICHARD ESTES: Ron brought up this question of syndicalism because one of the questions I found interesting in the book…there's, I think, a couple of chapters that address the relationship of anarchism to the unions, you know, union movements broadly defined. And here in the United States, basically trade unionism, trade union movements generally, have been facing a great deal of difficulty over the last several decades. And so, when I was reading those passages in the book, one of the things that came to my mind is the strategies and tactics associated with anarchism and syndicalism, are they still viable today, and if so, how?

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Alright, well, part of the reason we placed emphasis on unions was that in the historic anarchist movement, from its emergence back in the 1860s, unions were a central part of its strategy—for most anarchists, syndicalism was *the* way to go.

Not only focussing on unions, but certainly seeing unions as *absolutely central*, and it's through trade unions that anarchism made many of its biggest impacts historically. For example you had a situation in Argentina in the 1910s when there were two major union federations. These were the two big centres in the country and they were both different variants of anarchism and syndicalism.

So this is the kind of influence it had in the past. If you would, imagine what it would be like in the States if, say the AFL-CIO was an anarchist or a syndicalist organisation. But this wasn't actually that uncommon. So the emphasis on unions partly reflects the historical reality in which, certainly into the 20s and 30s, anarchists and syndicalists led, founded, major union federations around the world.

The question, though, is how do you actually get back to that? You spoke about strategy and tactics? Well, the *strategy* of syndicalism is quite straightforward. You run a sort of militant, radical, participatory, democratic, transformative trade unionism, you tie it up to other social movements in communities, you tie it up to social justice issues, issues such as racial prejudice and so on.

But, *tactics*, how do you actually get there? How do you actually get to that position of influence?

Now, at one level, the potential is there in that trade unionism, even in the States, continues to be an absolutely central force—and in the States itself, the AFL-CIO has seen a bit of a turnaround recently with, in figures I saw earlier this year, over a million new members being recruited. Once you look outside the States, you look at places like Brazil, South Africa, or South Korea, you see trade unionism playing not just a central role, but actually expanding its influence all the time.

Okay, but on another level, how do you actually link that to the anarchist movement? And this is a very tricky thing.

There is a *lot* of debate on that, and the book gets into a lot of it. I don't claim to have a magical formula here. What I would say, looking historically at anarchism, unions were absolutely critical. Looking at the present, I'd say that unions still have that potential to be critical.

But how to fit those two together? That's the trick and I think a lot will depend on context, a lot will depend on programme, a lot will depend on what people who find themselves part of an anarchist tradition actually do.

RICHARD ESTES: So would it be fair to say that people today, who might have a view that unions have become too sclerotic, are too difficult to transform, and that anarchism should move in a different direction, would be advocating a perspective that is either misguided or is potentially suicidal?

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Well, I think there again we have to look at context. One of the things that happened during the 20th century was the rise of quite centralised forms of trade unionism. So, trade unionism that was anarchist, or syndicalist, would be a unionism that was very flat, very participatory, a unionism that allowed for quite a development of a counter-culture, a proletarian counter-culture.

Now, in the 20th century, as unions have become more centralised, more entangled in the state, more tied to political parties, the amount of space in those unions to actually change them seems to often be quite narrow. I mean, if we look at the South African case, we see that while the unions' *official* policy is actually quite far to the left, there is actually not always that much space within the union to contest what that "left" would mean. So these issues of intolerance and centralism are going to play a critical role.

What I would say is: look at the historical experience. It would be vital to find ways to get an anarcho-syndicalist or anarchist programme back into the union and it won't be easy. It's certainly going to take a lot of *creativity*, a lot of *activity*.

Right now, that may not be on the agenda; that may not even be practical for people in a lot of circumstances. *Right now*, people may be investing their energy better into community organising, into alternative institution-building, but in the long term, I think it would be *absolutely* impossible to get the sort of change anarcho-syndicalism, or anarchism in general, has aimed at without some sort of link into the unions.

How exactly to do that, I think it's difficult to be prescriptive, but I think as a strategic objective it would be absolutely crucial.

[ANARCHISM AND CENTRALISATION]

RON GLICK: It seems that what you've described as the rise of an anarchist philosophy comes in response to the centralisation of capital in the emergence of the industrial revolution. And here we are now in the age of global capital and centralisation of that power with things like the Fortune 500 and, you know, global capital can move around and move around so quickly and easily. Is, is it really viable? It seems like this is an idea, a philosophy that has never really been able to compete successfully with more centralised power structures.

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Well I think, I think it's important to bear in mind that anarchism wouldn't necessarily be opposed to any centralisation *as such.* The question would be what is the form of centralisation that you are actually aiming at. Now, if you're going to build a movement from below upwards, a movement based on participation, assembly, inevitably you're going to end up having delegates and you going to end up having coordinating structures.

In that sense, anarchism can pose a form of centralisation and I *don't* think that's a bad thing at all, but it's important that that would be a *federalist, non-coercive* centralisation from below. And I think it can coordinate…potentially, anarchist movements could coordinate in a way that would be as efficient, but yet far more participatory than the centralisation we see on the part of capital and the state.

[GLOBALISATION: THEN AND NOW]

Now, to move on from that, your question around globalisation, your question around the rise of large companies, and so on: could anarchism pose…could it respond to, could it engage with this new world order?

I think one of the key points we wanted to make in this book is that anarchism did emerge very much in concrete circumstances that are not much different than ours. If you look at the period from the 1880s into the 1920s, the 1930s, we're actually talking about a period of very deep globalisation—a period in which capital movement internationally, while slower, was at least as extensive as it is today, in which international trade was actually freer than it is today.

So, you might think of anarchism as a movement which has got a lot to offer to contemporary anti-globalisation, counter-globalisation activists, because it operated, in its period of greatest influence, the 1880s to the 1920s, in a world that wasn't actually that different than what we have now.

[THE SOVIET UNION AND COMMUNISM]

RICHARD ESTES: One of the things I think is an important subject is there's a contrast between anarchism and, I guess the right way to say it would be State Socialism, or Marxist-Leninism that's put into practice. What, precisely, are the points of contention between that Marxist-Leninism and anarchism in relation to understanding class relationships, and to what extent is anarchism a different model than the State Socialist model that was attempted in the 20th century?

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: I think that this is actually quite crucial. The Marxist tradition, while it is not a homogenous tradition, the *actually-existing*, the *actually organised* Marxist movement

of the 19th and 20th centuries, was one very much *dominated* by a centralist vision—the vision that got its expression in Soviet Union, or the People's Republic of China.

And in anarchism's birth, anarchism's emergence in the 1860s, it was very much, a reaction not just against capitalism, not just against the state, but against what the anarchists like Bakunin saw as an incipient, centralised, authoritarian model of state socialism.

Now, the differences are at the level of the understanding of society, and there're differences at the level of the vision and the strategy. I want to talk about the vision and the strategy more.

Generally speaking, classical Marxism, whether it was in the original social democratic, or later in its Leninist form, saw the state as the engine of transformation. The basic idea was that you would take over the state, you would use the state to transform society from above. You would create your socialist citizens from above: even if people weren't ready, they could be compelled to become ready. The revolution wouldn't necessarily need to move at the speed of the slowest soldier. Rather, the vanguard of the class, at least the self-defined vanguard, would seize power and move to put in socialism *from above*.

Now, the anarchist model was very different from that, whereas Marxism-Leninism saw the building of a highly centralised, quite militarised party organisation with the aim of capturing state power, the anarchist tradition, including syndicalism, stressed the *participatory* model—that was based on participation, it was based on intellectual emancipation, it was based in training people in the here-and-now to run society in a democratic, participatory way in the future.

I mean, this was the idea that your means would have to match your ends. The way you organise now is going to shape what you get in the future. If you build a centralised, militarised party organisation aiming to seize state power and implement socialism from above, you're being perfectly consistent.

If, on the other hand, you want to create a democratic, horizontal society, well, you would actually have to start to do that now.

Tied to that was the idea in anarchism that, if this new society meant anything, it would have to be something that ordinary people created. By definition, you could not create a horizontal society from above. You can't, as Martin Buber says somewhere, take a young oak sapling, strip off its bark, strip off the leaves, use it as a club, and later stick it in the ground and hope that it is going to turn back into an oak tree.

So, in terms of stressing a democratic approach, in terms of stressing a non-authoritarian approach, in terms of making democracy *not a tactic, but absolutely central*, anarchists broke with what they saw as the tendency in Marxism to sacrifice people to goals rather than seeing people's emancipation as the goal in-and-of itself.

[MARXISM, ANARCHISM, CAPITALISM, AND THE SPANISH REVOLUTION]

RON GLICK: To me, the intersection between Marxism, anarchism and capitalism is the Spanish Civil War. Could you explain the dynamics going on there and how that affected the growth of one system over another?

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Sure. I just want to mention one thing about the relationship between anarchism and Marxism which plays out in this situation, which is that there's a bit of an overlap. Anarchists *do* take something from Marxism and that's, above all, Marxist economics.

So there, there's a bit of an overlap. We would be exaggerating if we set them up as entirely separate systems.

However, the differences harden over time, especially once you get the rise of the Soviet Union. Now, the Soviet Union, the formation of the Soviet Union, beginning from 1917 onwards, is absolutely central to the rise of Marxism in the 20th century. Before then, Marxism is not the mass movement it sort of becomes later.

Before then, Marxism is essentially a movement in Europe. It is not a movement that has any real traction in the rest of the world. Once the Soviet Union is established, the Communist Parties have really got a very powerful force in their corner.

Now, when you get to Spain, in 1936 there is essentially an attempted military coup. Francisco Franco, who's a general who is influenced by the ideas of fascism, particularly Mussolini-style fascism, rather than Hitler-style Nazism, tries to seize power. He's thrown back by a left coalition, which includes a large anarchist proportion, as well as the Spanish Communist Party.

Now civil war breaks out, which is why most people remember the events from '36 to '39 as the Spanish Civil War. What happens in the areas where anarchists are strong, is a large-scale application of the anarchist vision. What I mean is people self-managing factories, self-managing land, implementing social reforms, trying to implement the anarchist vision.

But within that left camp which is fighting against Franco's camp, a civil war starts to break out between the Communists and the anarchists, and the Soviet Union's calculation, then under Josef Stalin, is that a revolution in Spain (which the anarchists are actually doing) has to be stopped.

At one level, it would challenge the hegemony that the Communist International is trying to create in the workers' movement—anarchism in Spain is vastly, vastly more influential than Communism. At another level, Stalin, seeing the interests of "socialism" as equivalent to the interests of the Soviet Union, believes that a revolution there would essentially destabilise the relations he's trying to set up with Britain and France.

So, what this actually means, in practice, is besides the civil war against Franco and his forces, the anarchists find themselves under attack from Stalin, the Communist Party in Spain, and, by the time that the left, liberal coalition—the Republican forces, as they're usually called—are defeated by Franco, the revolution that the anarchists had tried to put into place, has *already* been destroyed by other left forces, foremost amongst which is the Communist Party.

RON GLICK: This reminds me somewhat of what happened with the razing of the Warsaw Ghetto, where Stalin didn't want this independent group to gain any traction against the Nazis, and wouldn't arm them.

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: I mean, I think part of the problem is that what Bakunin and Kropotkin feared—which was that "socialism" would become a tool of a new ruling elite and of state policy—had become a reality by the 1920s and the 1930s.

Before the Soviet Union was founded, Marxism was simply another movement out there. Guys you would know in the union, guys you would know in the political sphere—people you would engage with.

But from then on Marxism finds itself in a position where, on the one hand, Marxist-Leninist parties are playing an incredibly progressive role in all sorts of areas—for example, in the States, playing a very important role in championing black rights, in organising in the Deep South, and so on. But, on the other hand, they're being continually constrained by the *realpolitik*, by the power calculations of the Soviet leadership.

And you see this pattern play out again and again and again. So this is, to me, part of the tragedy of Marxism-Leninism—on one hand, it achieved a great many good things, but on another hand, this subordination of particular struggles to the interests and politics of the Soviet Union.

That has been something which…which essentially crippled it from the start as a people's movement.

[ANARCHISM AND CONTEMPORARY IMMIGRATION]

RICHARD ESTES: Lucien, I have a question regarding a subject that I don't recall really being very prominent in your book, but I have a feeling that it might be an important one in relation to anarchism in the contemporary social environment. One of the primary features of the kind of globalisation process that we've experienced in the last thirty or forty years has been a tremendous, almost exponential increase in immigration—both sanctioned by states as well as unsanctioned—and extraordinary, transnational movements of peoples around the world. What is the anarchist perspective about that immigration process, and does it potentially present opportunities for anarchism that didn't previously exist?

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Right. Well, from the 1920s to the 1970s, when the world economy is characterised by quite closed national economies, whether it's the Soviet model of central planning, or the Keynesian model in the West of demand-management, or import-substitution models in the "global south"—or the third world, or the colonial/postcolonial world, or whatever we want to call the other countries—building a vision of an international workers' movement is actually quite abstract, in the sense that wage levels were determined very much by national conditions, in that people's identities, their movement, all sorts of things were set up by very particular national experiences.

Now, with the deregulation of population movements and the international migration that you're talking about, you really do start to get international connections on a scale you haven't seen for a hundred years.

At one level this can, of course, pose huge problems in terms of backlashes against immigrants (for example, in South Africa, we had huge riots last year). On the other hand, it creates that potential for arguments around class as a unifying force to have much larger interest.

And, I mean, a third level is also a sort of circulation of political traditions that you get as a result. You get people coming into Western countries, who bring in very radical traditions that are very energising; traditions of struggle that are very impressive, traditions of struggle that are very much able to get things going again in places where they've stopped.

So, I think it's got a lot of threats, but it's also got a lot of potential in terms of people's identities, in terms of the political project that would resonate with people.

[CLASS POLITICS AND OTHER FORMS OF OPPRESSION]

RICHARD ESTES: One other thing I was wondering about too. You have a chapter towards the end that addresses issues of race and gender in regard to anarchism. Is the anarchist explanation for racial and gender divisions in society really adequate in the sense that it seems to reduce those divisions down to primarily being a class-based cause? Aren't there other causes and other influences there that need to be incorporated into an anarchist analysis?

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Well, I think here we come to an important aspect of the whole anarchist explanation, and we can tie it back to the question you posed earlier around Marxism.

Now, Marxism, as you know, one part of its power is its very simple explanation…you can essentially reduce everything to economics. Economics is defined as the heart of society, and therefore anything that happens in society has an economic basis.

Now, the anarchists did try, in general, to move away from that reductionism. But certainly it was characteristic of anarchist theory that class, while not necessarily *always primary, is always central* to explain social phenomena, such as race and gender.

Saying "central not primary" in the sense that…what this would mean in terms of race and gender would be that, for the classical anarchist movement…certainly it would be that issues of class expressed through the state, expressed through capital, expressed through labour market competition, would *help* explain the question of, say, racial prejudice.

But that wouldn't be the only explanation…that would be *central*, but there are a lot of *other* factors there which would have an independent logic, which you can't reduce. If you look at that chapter again, you'll see that the approach wasn't simply on reducing issues to class issues, but also seeing their roots in culture; their roots in prejudices that people have; their roots, even in pre-capitalist formations…

RICHARD ESTES: That's my last question, adequacy …

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: But, in terms of adequacy I'm not entirely…it's a difficult thing to say what's adequate or not, but certainly the argument that was made was that class was central, but *not* the sole explanation. That was the general tendency.

Is this a good argument? Well, I think it's a good argument.

Particularly around political strategy. Often questions of race and gender are simply reduced to people's attitudes, without asking the question of where the attitudes come *from*. By stressing class, you're also able to look at the role that class-based movements, such as trade unions, can play in securing advantages for black folk, for women, and so on.

At a second level, it also enriches your understanding of class politics, because if you reduce class, if you reduce working class organisation, to the issue of wages and working conditions, to sort of pork-chop issues, then you are actually going to miss a lot of the anarchist project, which is about emancipating people from *all* forms of social and economic inequalities.

So, ideally, what you would want to do is not end up with an economic reductionism. You would want to end up with a *radical* class politics that is feminist, that is anti-racist, that brings these things together in the form of popular movements that are *simultaneously* anti-capitalist, *simultaneously* deeply opposed to issues of gender and racial oppression and national oppression. So you'd like to try to synthesize these into a single coherent struggle.

RON GLICK: You're listening to KVVS, 90.3 FM. Lucien, we had a big protest here [University of California] on campus yesterday about tuition and pay cuts, and certainly issues of class and, so we're going to have some people come on, but I wanted to ask you one more question and then…

[ANARCHISM AFTER SEATTLE]

RICHARD ESTES: I want to ask you one closing question. What year was that thing in Seattle…do you remember…was that 2000, 2001?

RON GLICK: That was 1999…

RICHARD ESTES: 1999. There was this big anti-globalization protest, and was it a GATT meeting or a…

RON GLICK: It was WTO…

RICHARD ESTES: Yeah, a WTO meeting in Seattle, it was called "the Battle for Seattle." There was group that were described as anarchists…are you familiar what happened there, and how does that fit in?

RON GLICK: I think you're alluding to the "Black Bloc" by the way…

RICHARD ESTES: Just for clarification…

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Well, I think one of the interesting things that's been happening over the last twenty years is the re-emergence of a significant anarchist current. One of the expressions has been a range of anarchist activity in the "anti-globalisation," or "counter-globalisation" movement.

And the one that the grabbed media attention, I think, was this Black Bloc, which as I understand was essentially groups of people wearing black and balaclavas and trying to push protests in the direction of riots and so on. Now, I'm less concerned with whether that was a good tactic or not, than with the significance, the *overall significance* of that development.

The overall significance is this: that anarchism, over the last two or three decades, has been reviving as a very important force in many contexts…it's equivalent to the rebirth of an open Marxism in the 1960s.

Anarchism, as a pole of attraction over the last few years, is becoming extremely powerful and, in this sense, this is partly what our book is trying to do: as the new anarchist movement emerges internationally as a movement that starts to get a significant influence, it's important to debate and clarify the issues, which is why we've pulled together a book which, is a mixture of theory and history and philosophy.

Ja, I think I'll leave that there.

[ANARCHISM AND POSTMODERNISM]

RICHARD ESTES: Let me ask you one last question; it may be an overly theoretical question, so feel free to be, you know, dismissive of it. But it comes to mind in light of the remarks you just made. One of the things I tend to encounter quite frequently is this tendency among what I would call, I guess, the Marxist-Leninist and parliamentary socialist left to ascribe a lot of the current problems, politically, that they experience to postmodernism, which they seem to broadly define as this sort of excessive relativisation of class and culture to the point where there is no such thing as a meaningful class or cultural identity, or they're all the same, which I personally believe is a gross distortion of postmodernism from my own readings. But, in any event, they seem to be ascribing a great deal of blame to it in terms of their own predicament, and really criticizing it quite severely. While, as you've noted, anarchism seems to have thrived, it seems to have done quite well, during this very same postmodern period. So, I guess my question is: Do anarchists really share this perspective that more parliamentary socialist and Marxist-Leninists have about postmodernism? Or do they relate to it in an entirely different way?

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: Well, I think there's two things here.

The one is that one of the strengths of postmodernism is its focus on a more open-ended view of society and a more open-ended view of history. If you look at classical Marxist-Leninism it ended up with a very, very mechanical, narrow, reductionist view of how things work, to the extent you could virtually read off people's identities solely from their occupation, and their political views solely from their source of income. So that's a strength, and I think anarchists would appreciate that…in that anarchism is a much more open model, although it makes class central, it's a much more open than a Marxist model.

However, I do think that anarchism, historically, was very much a movement, a *modernist* movement that stressed *rationalism*, that stressed conscious human control of events, one that did see things as having a fixity, as having a stability, as having *a pattern and a purpose* far beyond anything that postmodernism would conceive. So, I would certainly say that someone like Bakunin or Kropotkin would be very, very critical of postmodern relativism.

On the one hand, it's also very, very moralistic actually, anarchism. It stresses morals. I'm not saying "moralistic" in a bad sense. On the other hand, it's very much enamoured of the idea of rationality as a tool to change society.

RICHARD ESTES: Well, LUCIEN VAN DER WALT, we really appreciate you making this time available to us today, and if people are interested in the book, it's entitled *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism.* It's available through AK Press so you can check out akpress.org to find out more about it.

RON GLICK: And do you have a website or anything that you'd like to give out? In South Africa?

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: I think you could just Google my name…you'll come up with a bunch of stuff. There is a blog at AK Press, but it's got an extremely long URL. So I don't actually remember the whole thing. Just Google my name and you'll come to my own website.

RON GLICK: Well, thanks so much. It's really been an interesting discussion…and get some sleep.

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT: No, thanks very much for having me and thanks for the questions. It's been absolutely brilliant!

RICHARD ESTES AND RON GLICK: Thank you!

RICHARD ESTES: …and good evening!

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Richard Estes and Ron Glick
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September 25, 2009

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