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Lessons from the Town of Cherán

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In a small Mexican town, local indigenous residents have created a new, democratic, and largely peaceful community. The question, what can we learn from their achievements?

Murray Bookchin, in his seminal work in the field of social ecology, *The Ecology of Freedom*, criticised the tendency of history to focus upon the ‘achievement of power’, the empires with their ‘temples, mortuaries and palaces’ — places that ‘evoke our ingrained awe of power’. The consequences of this attitude, to Bookchin, are very clear:

Tragically, this shadow has largely obscured the technics of peasants and artisans at the “base” of society: their widespread networks of villages and small towns, their patchwork farms and household gardens; their small enterprises; their markets organized around barter; their highly mutualistic work

systems; their keen sense of sociality; and their delightfully individuated crafts, mixed gardens, and local resources that provided the real sustenance and artwork of ordinary people.

The writings of ordinary history books paint a somewhat dismal picture of humanity for an anarchist or libertarian socialist. From the competing kingdoms of China's Warring States Period (475–221 BC), to the imperial empires' 'Scramble for Africa' (around 1881 – 1914), the annals of humanity seem awash with either an adoration for, or subjugation under, the great halls of power. But it is beneath those great halls that we may find the truly anarchistic history that we long for, a history of 'basic human conventions, communal solidarity, and mutual care' that tends to 'override' their various differences and act at the community level, in spite of their 'political or quasipolitical summits' (Bookchin). In other words, no matter the person sitting on the throne, there are a network of communalistic, mutualistic villages and farmsteads sitting at their feet.

This is not to say that all societies were centralised or headed by powerful figures. In fact, if you look beyond the standard history books you will find a wide breadth of human history that is governed in a communalistic and very democratic manners, whether in the confederated tribes of the Iroquois, or the communal villages of Sulawesi, Indonesia. Despite what many western histories would have us believe, democracy is not the invention of the Ancient Athenians, but a global tradition stretching back hundreds, if not thousands, of years. The reluctance to teach western audiences this is explained nicely by David Graeber:

The real reason for the unwillingness of most scholars to see a Sulawesi or Tallensi village council as "democratic"—well, aside from simple racism, the reluctance to admit anyone Westerners slaughtered with such relative impunity were quite on the level as Pericles.

The difference, ultimately, between democracy in these traditions and that of modern politics is the act of voting itself. Consensus was the preferred democratic method of these societies, and as Graeber writes, we may find 'over and over' again egalitarian communities 'across the world, from Australia to Siberia' that utilised it. Why, he asks, because 'it is much easier in a face-to-face community' to come to an agreement on what most members of the community want to do, and that, as is typical of these societies, 'there would be no way to compel a minority to agree with a majority decision'. The lack of a monopoly force means a lack of power to force people into accepting decisions, and so, naturally, a democratic method must be employed that involves all the members of the community. The lack of a voting system similar to the Greeks or our modern societies may have led historians to ignore them, but rest assured, democracy is not an exception in history, but often (atleast locally) the rule.

It is these traditions that also influenced the thought of two Nigerian anarchists, Sam Mbah and I.E Igariwey, who in their joint work, *African Anarchism: The History of a Movement*, assert that whilst anarchism 'as an abstraction may indeed be remote to Africans', anarchist practises are 'not at all unknown as a way of life'. African society was for the most part communalistic, where a 'symbiosis arose between groups earning their living in different manners'. Their political organisation, based on decentralised meetings and gatherings, in no way reflected the centralised systems that developed elsewhere in the world. As they describe:

Such meetings and gatherings were not guided by any known written laws, for there were none. Instead, they were based on traditional belief systems, mutual respect, and indigenous principles of natural law and justice.

It is these historical traditions that may act as rays of sunshine in our otherwise dismal pictures of the future. If there are anarchis-

tic practises out there in the world that have existed for a longer time than our capitalistic hellhole, then we must only reignite those practises. We do not necessarily have to build a new, seemingly alien *utopia*, we must only encourage the very human values that predate our current *dystopia*. Or, in the words of the 3rd century Taoist philosopher Bao Jingyan, we must only turn back to a time before our hearts became ‘daily more filled with evil designs’.

So where does Cherán fit into all this?

San Francisco Cherán, as it is fully named, is an indigenous community found in the state of Michoacán, Mexico. Beset by criminal activity, illegal logging, and the ‘constant intrigues’ of local political parties, the tired inhabitants of Cherán gathered together on April 15, 2011 to take action into their own hands. They swiftly kicked out the illegal loggers that were destroying their natural resources, but when they were done, they turned towards the municipal authorities and law-enforcement that were failing them. Kicking them out too, the people of Cherán came to establish a ‘community general assembly’, built from below by assemblies set up in local neighbourhoods. Their reasons were explained nicely by one local, Josefina Estrada, to the *Los Angeles Times*: ‘We couldn’t trust the authorities or police any more, we didn’t feel that they protected us or helped us. We saw them as accomplices with the criminals.’

The peace and security that this has afforded the residents of Cherán is incredible. The state surrounding them had in one year 180 murders in a month, and yet the town’s only real crime comes from drunken fights or driving whilst under the influence. Those offenders might be expected to spend some time sobering up behind bars, or taking on community service, but punishment rarely goes beyond that. Their political record, compared to much of Mexico, is also very admirable, with their council members being paid modest wages and held to account by democratic assemblies.

In the years before the revolt, too, roughly half of Cherán’s 59,000 acres of forest was illegal felled, but now, with the loggers

them, not *for* them or *in place* of them. What we may call or feel to be an anarchistic movement may not necessarily consider itself such, but that does not make it any less worthy of our support. What we see in Cherán is the people taking their liberation into their own hands, an act that should fill us with hope.

gone and regular patrolling of the land, they are well defended. The significance of this achievement is explained, also, in an interview in the *Los Angeles Times*:

‘These forests are our essence, they were left to us by our forefathers for protection and nurturing,’ said Francisco Huaroco, 41, a member of the forest patrol, as he and a team trekked past stumps that attest to former ransacking. ‘Without these woods, our community is not whole, is not itself.’

These wonderful developments should inspire any leftist, and may lead some to wonder: *what kind of leftist influence can be found in Cherán?* That is an important question, and it is equally important, when answering that question, to stress the influence of Cherán’s own indigenous culture on the creation of their new community. As expressed by an article in *Open Democracy*:

The community of Cherán has occupied this territory since before the colonization process. It has conserved its own institutions to organize itself in the political, cultural, economic and social sphere, and this has been reflected in its social dynamics. The inhabitants of the municipality have combined their own practices with the national law, in a dual law regime.

Though the town has certainly had its socialist influences (as can be seen in the murals of the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata), there appears to be no Marxist insurgency, communist vanguard or anarchist agitators anywhere in sight. There are no red or black flags flying at the forefront of this movement, only the faces of locals who thought ‘enough was enough’. And although they may have been inspired by the revolutions of the world, past and present, it was their own indigenous culture, traditions and place of living that gave substance to their rebellion and laid the

groundwork for their new community. Cherán has indeed received support from the radical-left the world over, but it is more local groups like *Colectivo Emancipaciones*, a Latin-America indigenous rights group, that have given them their most notable backing.

There are two significant lessons that we might learn from communities like Cherán:

1. *That we must maintain hope in our seemingly glum and non-revolutionary world.* Moments like these bolster the anarchist belief that human beings can be, at their roots, anarchistic, and by that I mean that human beings, as local people, inspired by their local traditions, communities and cultures, will strive to govern themselves and by extension, in the modern day, bring about an end to the miseries of the capitalist state.
2. *That a movement does not need to fly an anarchist flag to achieve anarchist ideals.* If we truly believe that humanity is, at its roots, capable of achieving anarchy, then we do not need to mandate or expect that movements conform to the standards that define our own. If we truly believe that human societies, if given the opportunity, will tend towards a communal way of living, then there is little need for us to stand around and dictate or unfairly scrutinise revolutionary action, but only seek to inspire and support it.

When thinking of Cherán, I would propose that we should be the true ‘radical’ as discussed by Paulo Freire in a preface to his work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

This person does not consider himself or herself to be the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.

Cemented in Freire’s incredible work is the idea that we must develop ‘problem-posing education’ that centres the process of learning around the material conditions of the learner, or in other words, the ‘here and now’. As he expresses:

The point of departure of the movement lies in the people themselves. But since people do not exist apart from the world, apart from reality, the movement must begin with the human-world relationship. Accordingly, the point of departure must always be with men and women in the “here and now,” which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they intervene.

The first line of this quote is significant here, for in Cherán it is indeed true that the departure of the movement could be found in the people themselves. Their local social ties, heritage and common humanity provided the groundwork for their new society. It was then just the development of an understanding of the ills of capitalism and its causes that led to that wonderful day on April 15, 2011. For us radicals, we only have to pose the question: ‘why must things be this way?’, and where needed, offer the tools through which that way can be changed. What is important, however, is that we *trust* the people to organise and develop their liberation themselves. Education is integral, but not interference. We might try to plant the seed, but we should not determine how the plant will grow.

If the kinds of traditions that Bookchin, Graeber, Mbah and Igariwey spoke of, combined with the influence of revolutionary thought and practise from elsewhere in the world, led to rebellion in Cherán, then we can expect that many such rebellions could follow. The task of the radical, then, is not to try and take control of a movement, nor ‘impose their word’ on it (to use Freire’s phrasing), but to engage with people, inspire them, and fight *with*