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Nationalist Anarchism

Understanding Liberation in the Korean Anarchist
Movement

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Nationalist Anarchism? Is that not a clear juxtaposition? In many ways, yes it is. Traditional anarchist theory resoundingly rejects nationalism as much as it rejects the nation-state, treating it like a ‘superstition artificially created and maintained through a network of lies and falsehoods’ to use the words of Emma Goldman. Nationalist rhetoric is seen as the tool of the oppressor, used to create an ‘imagined community’ or imagined comradeship between the people and their elites, which can then be mobilised to colonise, outdo or destroy those of other communities. The poor of the nation are expected to go along with the words of their rulers, as, according to nationalist ideology, they are ‘all in this together.’

In practise, however, nationalism is notoriously hard to shake off. In a world beset by statehood, bureaucracies and national identity, all three of which giving certain people enormous historical power, groups have sought liberation from oppression by attempting to “flip” the tools of their oppressors against them. In modern history, this had led oppressed groups to create strong nations or

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identities of their own, whether that be the Indonesians when they freed themselves from the Dutch, the Vietnamese when they threw off the shackles of French imperialism, or Palestinians today fighting to reclaim land from Israel. Whilst these national identities may not have perfectly existed before, and certainly do not entirely fit in with socialist perceptions of nationalism, they serve as powerful rallying cries for the liberation of millions of people.

As anarchists we may be tempted to judge these revolutions for their commitment to statehood, but we must remember that this is quite easy to do from the comfort of our computer screens. There are criticisms to be made, and criticisms that are often justified, but to say simply that a liberation movement must completely reject creating a national identity ignores the urgency of that movement and the immediate and often desperate need of the people for liberation from their oppressors.

As a case study, let me introduce the situation that Korean anarchists faced in the early 20th century. Colonised by Imperial Japan 1910, Korean activists began to spark a military and diplomatic campaign with the goal of freeing the country from the clutches of this new imperial power. After a popular protest named the 'March First Movement' (삼일 운동, sam-il undong) was violently suppressed by the Japanese army, the movement's leaders and thousands of other activists fled to China. In China, the independence activists, with the support of the Chinese government, created the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea (KPG) and the Korean Liberation Army, which would begin to lead attacks on Japan.

Meanwhile the anarchists, who were also involved in the March First Movement, fled in different directions. Some went to China and created the Korean Anarchist Federation (KAF), which organised and published works on Korean independence and anarchist theory. Many of the others, aided by the KAF, fled to Manchuria, a territory to the north of Korea, and began establishing various anarchist and anarcho-communist territories, one of which would come to be known as Korean People's Association in Manchuria

culture is as homogeneous or static as the invented traditions of nationalism.’

In the case of Korea under Imperial Japan, we can reasonably criticise whether Korean anarchists took the right course in fully supporting the national movement, but we should never discount them as anarchists for having done so. If we do, then we are looking at global resistance movements through a eurocentric and ideologically purist lens, and rejecting the absolute necessity of liberation from imperial oppressors.

The general lesson here is that we get into a difficult business when we attempt to claim what is or is not an ‘anarchist movement.’ Any movement, anarchist or not, is going to be heavily influenced by its specific social, cultural and historical context. To ignore those is to ignore the realities and difficulties that people face when building a popular movement against oppression. In this case, the reality exists that national movements give oppressed groups a power over their own destiny that they may have never had before. We may criticise that, but not condemn it entirely, lest we let our purism get in the way of liberation.

Recommended reading on the subject:

1. *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution*, ed. by Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt.
2. *Anarchism in Korea: Independence, Transnationalism, and the Question of National Development, 1919–1984*, by Dongyoun Hwang.

(KPAM), an autonomous anarchist zone populated by an estimated two million Korean migrants. Unlike the two nations bordering it, the KPAM, otherwise known as the Shinmin Prefecture, ran on a system controlled by bottom-up decision-making that provided economic autonomy for the working class. Unlike the recently created and centrally-planned economy of the USSR, which adopted capitalist management systems in its factories, the prefecture advocated for the formation of ‘voluntary rural co-operatives’ that would be ‘self-managed by the peasantry.’

The literature written by Korean anarchists, and by the Korean Anarchist Federation, show a clear support for what was being established in Manchuria. One publication, called *The Talhwan* (탈환, ‘Recapture’), took a clear stance on the oppressive nature of the state:

‘No matter what kind of form it takes, government is a tool for the minority with power to oppress the masses, and an obstacle that stands in the way of realizing mutual human fraternity. Therefore, we do not allow for its existence.’

To make their condemnation of the state even clearer, writers in *The Talhwan* also criticise the hypocritical policies of the ‘so called government of peasants and workers,’ otherwise known as the Soviet Union. Separating themselves distinctly from state socialists, they decried the ‘despotic and dictatorial’ actions of the Communist Party in the creation of state capitalism, ‘an extended form of individual capitalism that concentrates capital in the hands of the government.’ These activists, and the society they were creating in Manchuria, were clearly embedded in the anarchist tradition in name and practise.

Spurring these anarchists on, however, was a nationalism that could be considered to be in conflict with anarchist principles. One Shin Chaeho (1880–1936), another Korean revolutionary based in

China, wrote extensively on the need to destroy the occupying ‘foreign race’ of Japan. Consider these two short excerpts from a piece of his called ‘Declaration of the Korean Revolution’:

‘To sustain the Korean People’s survival, we need to wipe out Robber Japan. The expulsion of Robber Japan can only be accomplished by a revolution’ ... ‘To destroy the rule of a foreign race. Why? Since at the top of “Korea” resides a foreign race, “Japan,” a despotic country, Korea under the despotism of a foreign race is not an authentic Korea. To discover the authentic Korea, we destroy the rule of a foreign race.’

Devoid of context we might be tempted to judge his anarchist credentials, but that does not mean that his work is devoid of anarchist sentiments. In the same piece, he asserts that this revolution to ‘destroy the rule of a foreign race’ should never be led by ‘a divine person, a sage, or a gallant hero,’ and neither should it be sparked by ‘vehement statement’ like ‘masses, let’s awaken’ or ‘the masses, be awakened.’ Shin Chaeho believed, in true anarchist fashion, that the revolution should be guided by the people through spontaneous, decentralised uprising.

As the two historians of anarchism in the postcolonial world, Steven Hirsch and Lucien Van de Walt, rightly point out, Korean anarchists like Shin Chaeho at some point ‘had to confront the tension between anarchism as a universal idea’ and ‘their national aspirations to achieve the immediate goal of retaking independence from Japanese imperialism.’ This was indicative, overall, of the ‘complex relationship in semi-colonial contexts between national consciousness and transnational concerns.’ They quote the anarchist Sim Yongcheol to further illustrate this:

‘Since Korean anarchists were slaves who lost their country, they had to rely with affection on nationalism

and patriotism, and thus had difficulties in practise in discerning what their main idea was and what their secondary idea was. The reason was due to that there was the only one: Japanese imperialism. My life is one that has drifted along with this kind of contradiction inside.’

It is this kind of sentiment that led the historian Horiuchi Minoru to define Korean anarchism as a ‘nationalistic anarchism.’ To be an anarchist in this context was to deal with the balancing of two desires, one an end goal, and one an immediate need. Dongyoun Hwang, a historian of anarchism in Korea, refuses to consider this a failure, and believes to call it such would be ‘eurocentric’ and show a lack of understanding of the historical period in which they lived. Imperialism, or more specifically, their subjection to it, led to a ‘reconfiguration’ of their anarchism within the context of a ‘national goal and boundaries.’ We can see similar trends in other anarchist movements of the same period, where subjugation by an imperial power with a clear identity led to the desire to create a national “counter-identity,” even if that identity needs to be artificially constructed to some extent.

Anarchists should not condemn these movements, but they should not be completely uncritical either. As Maia Ramnath asserts, in her book *Decolonizing Anarchism*, it would be ‘callous to discount the value of ethnic pride’ in a context ‘where ethnicity is brutalized and culture decimated,’ but also naive to ignore that this ethnic pride can be manipulated and used in the formation of a hierarchical, state-bound society. As she states:

‘In the colonial context, the defence of ethnic identity and cultural divergence from the dominant is a key component of resistance, with the caveat that it’s equally crucial to pay attention to who’s dictating the “correct” expression of culture and ethnicity. No