

Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt, 2013, "Black Flame", in Robert Graham (ed.), *Anarchism: A documentary history of libertarian ideas: volume 3: The New Anarchism (1974-2008)*, Black Rose Books: Montréal, New York, London, pp. 454-460.

69. Schmidt & Van Der Walt: Black Flame (2009)

In their controversial book, Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism, Counterpower Volume 1 (Oakland: AK Press, 2009), Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt argue that "there is only one anarchist tradition," the tradition of class struggle anarchism "rooted in the work of Bakunin" and his International Alliance of Socialist Democracy (page 71), thereby excluding, among others, the Daoists (Volume One, Selection 1), God-win (Volume One, Selection 4), Stirner (Volume One, Selection 11), and even Proudhon (Volume One, Selections 8, 9, 12 & 18), from the anarchist "canon," a position distinctly at odds with the approach taken in this anthology. In addition to defending a narrow definition of anarchism, they argue in support of a Platformist position (Volume One, Selection 115,) that for anarchists to be effective they need to form ideologically unified anarchist groups "with a shared analysis, strategy, and tactics, coordinated action, and an organizational discipline."

“Anarchism” is often wrongly identified as chaos, disorganization, and destruction. It is a type of socialism, and is against capitalism and landlordism, but it is also a *libertarian* type of socialism. For anarchism, individual freedom and individuality are extremely important, and are best developed in a context of democracy and equality. Individuals, however, are divided into classes based on exploitation and power under present-day systems of capitalism and landlordism. To end this situation it is necessary to engage in class struggle and revolution, creating a free socialist society based on common ownership, self-management, democratic planning from below, and production for need, not profit. Only such a social order makes individual freedom possible.

The state, whether heralded in stars and stripes or a hammer and sickle, is part of the problem. It concentrates power in the hands of the few at the apex of its hierarchy, and defends the system that benefits a ruling class of capitalists, landlords, and state managers. It cannot be used for revolution, since it only creates ruling elites—precisely the class system that anarchists want to abolish. For anarchists the new society will be classless, egalitarian, participatory, and creative, all features incompatible with a state apparatus.

Now, “every anarchist is a socialist, but not every socialist is an anarchist” [Volume Two, Selection 55]. Since its emergence, socialism has been divided into two main tendencies: libertarian socialism, which rejects the state and hierarchy more generally; and political socialism, which advocates “a political battle against capitalism waged through centrally organized workers’ parties aimed at seizing and utilizing State power to usher in socialism” (W. Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves*). Anarchism is an example of the first strand; classical Marxism is an example of revolutionary political socialism, while social democracy stands for a peaceful and gradual political socialism.

For anarchism it is a struggle by the working class and peasantry—the “popular classes”—that can alone fundamentally change society. These two groups constitute the great majority of humanity, and are the only ones with a basic interest in changing society as well as the power to do so. The emancipation of the popular classes—and consequently, the creation of a free society and the emancipation of all human beings—must be undertaken by those classes, themselves. Struggles against the economic, social, and political injustices of the present must be waged from below by “ordinary” people, organized democratically, and outside of and against the state and mainstream political parties.

In stressing individual freedom, and believing that such freedom is only realized through cooperation and equality, anarchism emphasizes the need to organize the popular classes in participatory and democratic movements, and the significance of direct action. It is critical to build movements that are able to develop a counterpower to confront and supplant the power of the ruling class and

the state. At the same time, it is essential to create a revolutionary popular counterculture that challenges the values of class society with a new outlook based on democracy, equality, and solidarity.

The most important strand in anarchism has, we argue, always been syndicalism: the view that unions—built through daily struggles, a radically democratic practice, and popular education—are crucial levers of revolution, and can even serve as the nucleus of a free socialist order. Through a revolutionary general strike, based on the occupation of workplaces, working people will be able to take control of production and reorient it toward human need, not profit. Syndicalism envisages a radically democratic unionism as prefiguring the new world, and aims to organize across borders and in promotion of a revolutionary popular counterculture. It rejects bureaucratic styles of unionism as well as the notion that unions should only concern themselves with economic issues or electing prolabour political parties...

The broad anarchist tradition stresses class, but this should not be mistaken for a crude workerism that fetishizes male factory workers in heavy boots and hardhats. The working class and peasantry are understood in expansive terms: the working class includes all waged workers who lack control of their work, whether employed in agriculture, industry, or services, including casual and informal workers as well as their families and the unemployed; the peasantry includes all small farmers who are subject to the control and exploitation of other classes, including sharecroppers and labour tenants.

The stress on class also does not mean a narrow focus on economic issues. What characterizes the broad anarchist tradition is not economism but a concern with struggling against the many injustices of the present. As the popular classes are international, multinational, and multiracial, anarchism is internationalist, underscoring common class interests worldwide, regardless of borders, cultures, race, and sex. For anarchists, a worker in Bangalore has more in common with a worker in Omsk, Johannesburg, Mexico City, or Seoul than with the Indian elite. Karl Marx's ringing phrase "Working men of all countries, unite!" is taken in its most literal and direct sense.

To create a world movement requires, in turn, taking seriously the specific problems faced by particular groups like oppressed nationalities, races, and women, and linking their struggles for emancipation to the universal class struggle. There is a powerful anti-imperialist, antimilitarist, antiracist, and feminist impulse—"feminist" in the sense of promoting women's emancipation—in the broad anarchist tradition, all within a class framework...

According to Eltzbacher... anyone who held an antistatist position must be an anarchist, even if they disagreed over fundamental issues like the nature of society, law, property, or the means of changing society. This minimalist defini-

tion of anarchism overlapped with the tendency of many anarchists and syndicalists to invent myths about their own history. Kropotkin was not alone in constructing an imagined prehistory for the anarchist movement, a supposed genealogy of anarchist ideas and movements that dated back to the antiquity of Asia and Europe...

There are obvious problems here. If an anarchist is someone who “negates” the state, it is by no means clear how anarchism differs from the most radical economic liberals, like Murray Rothbard, who envisage a stateless society based on private property and an unrestrained free market. Likewise, classical Marxism’s ultimate objective is a stateless society without alienation and compulsion. Using Eltzbacher’s definition, both Rothbard and Marx could arguably earn a place in the pantheon of anarchist sages; it would be arbitrary to exclude them. In other words, Eltzbacher’s definition fails the basic task of clearly delineating anarchism from other ideas and therefore cannot be regarded as adequate.

The tendency to project anarchism onto all of human history has related problems: on the one hand, no serious examination of Lao-tzu [Volume One, Selection 1], the Anabaptists, and Bakunin can maintain that they shared the same views and goals, so it is not clear why they should be grouped together; and on the other hand, if anarchism is a universal feature of society, then it becomes very difficult indeed to explain why it arises, or to place it in its historical context, to delineate its boundaries, and analyze its class character and role at a particular time...

The obvious temptation is to take refuge in psychological explanations. Peter Marshall, for example, claims that the “first anarchist” was the first person who rebelled against “authority,” and that anarchism was rooted in human nature, “a timeless struggle” between “those who wanted to rule and those who refused to be ruled or to rule in turn,” premised on a “drive for freedom,” a “deeply felt human need.” The radical environmentalist and libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin made the same argument, adding a Freudian touch: anarchism is a “great libidinal movement of humanity to shake off the repressive apparatus created by hierarchical society” and originates in the “age-old drive” of the oppressed for freedom.

Yet there is no real evidence for this line of argument, and it fails to explain why anarchism has been significant in some periods and almost entirely absent in others. If anarchism is a human drive, why have its fortunes varied so dramatically over time? Only a historical and social analysis can really explain the rise and fall of anarchism, and this requires recourse to social science, not psychology...

Having rejected the contention that antistatism and a belief in individual freedom constitute the defining features of anarchism, we have suggested that a

more adequate definition of anarchism can be derived from an examination of the intellectual and social trend that defined itself as anarchist from the 1860s onward. Given that antistatism is at best a *necessary* component of anarchist thought, but not a *sufficient* basis on which to classify a set of ideas or a particular thinker as part of the anarchist tradition, it follows that Godwin [Volume One, Selection 4], Stirner [Volume One, Selection 11], and Tolstoy [Volume One, Selections 47 & 75] cannot truly be considered anarchists. Thinkers and activists who follow in the footsteps of these writers cannot, in turn, be truly considered anarchists or part of the anarchist tradition, even if they may perhaps be considered libertarians.

It follows from there that commonly used categories such as “philosophical anarchism” (often used in reference to Godwin or Tucker), “individualist anarchism” (used in reference to Stirner or the mutualists), “spiritual anarchism” (used in reference to Tolstoy and his cothinkers), or “lifestyle anarchism” (usually used in reference to latter-day Stirnerites) fall away. Because the ideas designated by these names are not part of the anarchist tradition, their categorization [as] variants of anarchism is misleading and arises from a misunderstanding of anarchism. Likewise, adding the rider “class struggle” or “social” to the word anarchist implies that there are anarchists who do not favour class struggle or who are individualists, neither of which is an accurate usage...

It is possible to identify libertarian and libertarian socialist tendencies throughout recorded history, analyse the ideas of each tendency, and examine their historical role. Yet anarchism, we have argued, is not a universal aspect of society or the psyche. It emerged from within the socialist and working-class movement 150 years ago, and its novelty matters. It was also very much a product of modernity and emerged against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism [Volume One, Chapter 3]. The ideas of anarchism themselves are still profoundly marked by the modern period and modernist thought. Its stress on individual freedom, democracy, and egalitarianism, its embrace of rationalism, science, and modern technology, its belief that history may be designed and directed by humankind, and its hope that the future can be made better than the past—in short, the idea of progress—all mark anarchism as a child of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, like liberalism and Marxism. Premodern libertarian ideas were expressed in the language of religion and a hankering for a lost idyllic past; anarchism, like liberalism and Marxism, embraces rationalism and progress. Nothing better expresses this linkage than the notion of “scientific socialism,” a term widely used by Marxists, but actually coined by Proudhon [Volume One, Selection 8].

Not only is it the case that anarchism *did* not exist in the premodern world; it is also the case that it *could not have*, for it is rooted in the social and intellec-

tual revolutions of the modern world. And as modernity spread around the globe from the northern Atlantic region, the preconditions for anarchism spread too. By the time of Bakunin, the Alliance, and the First International, the conditions were ripe for anarchism in parts of Europe, the Americas, and Africa; within thirty years, the modernization of Asia had opened another continent...

“Class struggle” anarchism, sometimes called revolutionary or communist anarchism, is not a type of anarchism; in our view, it is the *only* anarchism...

[W]e develop a distinction within the broad anarchist tradition between two main strategic approaches, which we call “mass anarchism” and “insurrectionist anarchism.” Mass anarchism stresses that only mass movements can create a revolutionary change in society, that such movements are typically built through struggles around immediate issues and reforms (whether concerning wages, police brutality, high prices, and so on), and that anarchists must participate in such movements to radicalize and transform them into levers of revolutionary change. What is critical is that reforms are won *from below*: these victories must be distinguished from reforms applied from above, which undermine popular movements.

The insurrectionist approach, in contrast, claims that reforms are illusory, that movements like unions are willing or unwitting bulwarks of the existing order, and that formal organizations are authoritarian [Volume One, Selection 35]. Consequently, insurrectionist anarchism emphasizes armed action—“propaganda by the deed”—as the most important means of evoking a spontaneous revolutionary upsurge. What distinguishes insurrectionist anarchism from mass anarchism is not necessarily violence as such but its place in strategy: for insurrectionist anarchism, propaganda by the deed, carried out by conscious anarchists, is seen as a means of generating a mass movement; for most mass anarchism, violence operates as a means of self-defence for an *existing* mass movement...

At the heart of the mass anarchist tradition is the view that it is necessary to build a popular revolutionary movement—centred on a revolutionary counter-culture and the formation of organs of counterpower—in order to lay the basis for a new social order in place of capitalism, landlordism, and the state. Such a movement might engage in struggles around reforms, but it ultimately must aim to constitute the basis of a new society within the shell of the old, an incipient new social order that would finally explode and supersede the old one. Insurrectionist anarchism is *impossibilist*, in that it views reforms as impossible and futile; mass anarchism is *possibilist*, believing that it is both possible and desirable to win, to force reforms from the ruling classes, and that such concessions strengthen rather than undermine popular movements and struggles, and can improve popular conditions. Through direct action, for example, progressive changes in law

can be demanded and enforced, without the need for participation in the apparatus of the state.

Syndicalism is a powerful expression of the mass anarchist perspective [Volume One, Chapter 12]. Historically, it was above all syndicalism that provided the anarchist tradition with a mass base and appeal. Not all mass anarchists were syndicalists, however. Some were supporters of syndicalism, but with reservations, usually around the “embryo hypothesis”: the view that union structures form an adequate basis for a postcapitalist society [Volume One, Selections 25–27]. There were other mass anarchists who were antisyndicalist, for they did not believe unions could make a revolution. Here we see two main variants: those who rejected the workplace in favour of community struggles, and those who favoured workplace action with some independence from the unions...

One of the key debates we discuss in this volume is the question of whether anarchists and syndicalists need political groups dedicated to the promotion of the ideas of the broad anarchist tradition, and if so, what form such groups should take. When the editors of the Paris-based anarchist newspaper *Dielo Truda* (“Workers’ Cause”) issued the *Organizational Platform of the Libertarian Communists* in 1926 [Volume One, Selection 115], they were met by a storm of controversy. Some anarchists saw the editors’ advocacy of a unified anarchist political organization with collective discipline as an attempt to “Bolshevise” anarchism and accused its primary authors, Arshinov and Makhno, of going over to classical Marxism. We argue, on the contrary, that the *Platform* and “Platformism” were not a break with the anarchist tradition but a fairly orthodox re-statement of well-established views.

From the time of Bakunin—who was part of the anarchist International Alliance of Socialist Democracy, which operated within the First International—the great majority of anarchists and syndicalists advocated the formation of specific anarchist political groups *in addition* to mass organizations like syndicalist unions.

In other words, most supported organizational dualism: the mass organization, such as unions, must work in tandem with specifically anarchist and syndicalist political organizations. Moreover, most believed that these groups should have fairly homogeneous principled, strategic, and tactical positions as well as some form of organizational discipline...

Any progressive movement for social change must inevitably confront the question of the relationship between the militant minority of conscious activists with a revolutionary programme and the broader popular classes. Should the revolutionaries substitute for the masses, as Blanqui suggested, or dominate them through a dictatorship, as Lenin believed? For the broad anarchist tradition, such positions are not acceptable, as they reproduce the very relations of domination

and the oppression of the individual that the tradition rejects. It follows that the role of anarchists or syndicalists is to act as a catalyst for the self-emancipation of the masses, promoting both the new faith of which Bakunin spoke as well as popular self-organization and participatory democracy.

There are various ways in which this can be done, and it is on this issue that the question of the need for a specific anarchist political organization arises. There are a number of anarchist and syndicalist positions on this issue, as we have noted. The antiorganizationalist approach is flawed by its failure to consider the dangers of informal organization and its dogmatic view that it is impossible to establish a formal organization compatible with anarchist principles. The strand of syndicalism that denies the need for a specific anarchist or syndicalist political organization fails to explain how a syndicalist union will be defended against the inevitable emergence of rival political currents within its ranks in the absence of such a body. The approach that calls only for a loose organization that seeks to unite all anarchists and syndicalists, regardless of profound differences in outlook, on the basis of what they share does not provide a solution either: an organization characterized by a wide diversity of views must lack a clear programme of action and fail to effectively coordinate the efforts of its militants in the battle of ideas; it is likely to split when confronted with situations that require a unified response. This approach also fails to explain why the unity of all anarchists should be seen as an end in itself and why a common programme should be seen as incompatible with anarchist principles.

The Bakuninist position, advocating an organization of tendency with a shared analysis, strategy, and tactics, coordinated action, and an organizational discipline, seems the most effective approach. By coordinating activity, promoting common positions on the tasks of the present and future, and rallying militants around a programme, it offers the basis for consistent and coherent work, the direction of limited resources toward key challenges, and the defence and extension of the influence of anarchism. This approach, going back to the Alliance and expressed in the *Platform*, is probably the only way that anarchism can challenge the hold of main stream political parties as well as nationalist, statist, and other ideas, and ensure that the anarchists' "new faith" provides a guide for the struggles of the popular classes.