
It’s noticeable that reviews of books on anarchism often try to answer two questions that are not self-evidently related: first, is anarchism a coherent or practical ideological position, and second, is the book any good? In many cases, the answer to the second question is entirely determined by the answer to the first; if authors and reviewers agree on question one, then all is well. If not, the debate rapidly descends into polemic, often fierce. The truth, however, is that anarchists have indeed been important historical actors from time to time—notably but by no means exclusively in Spain and Ukraine—and that anarchism is a significant tendency within revolutionary socialist thought. The analysis of anarchist history cannot be abandoned by the rest of us as the exclusive preserve of libertarians.

This book is a sympathetic, interesting and wide-ranging account of the anarchist tradition, written by two South Africans, one an investigative journalist and the other an academic social scientist. It is the first of two instalments of an ambitious larger project, in which the authors’ threefold intention is to challenge ‘commonly held views about anarchism and syndicalism’, re-examine ‘the ideas of the broad anarchist tradition’ and synthesise the ‘global history of the movement’ (8).

Schmidt (the journalist) and van der Walt (the academic) are not the first to attempt a broad general account of libertarian ideas and activism, but their work is distinguished by two key features. The first is their serious attempt to derive a defendable definition of what the ‘anarchist tradition’ actually is, one that moves beyond the cliché of extreme individualism and opposition to the state, to relocate the roots of that tradition firmly in nineteenth-century European revolutionary socialism, and most specifically in the First International. The second key feature is one that (I hope) justifies the inclusion of this review in a journal dedicated to South African history. Schmidt and van der Walt emphasise from the start that ‘the broad anarchist tradition was an international movement that cannot be adequately understood through the focus on Western anarchism that typifies most existing accounts’ (8; emphasis added). It is clear that, despite its origins, the idea that anarchism has been mainly a European and North American rather than a global phenomenon is one of the ‘commonly held views’ that this work sets out to challenge. The question, therefore, is to what extent Schmidt and van der Walt succeed in making a case for a significant anarchist tradition in the global south.

The whole of the second chapter is devoted to arguing for a coherent and narrow definition of anarchism as essentially modern, revolutionary and socialist in character. If anarchism is stripped of its revolutionary and socialist ambitions, and reduced to a mere opposition to constraints on the individual’s freedom by the state, two consequences follow. First, class politics disappears in the present, egalitarian social organisation vanishes from the future, and we can make no informed prediction about what a future anarchist society might look like; second, all kinds of right-wing and new-age anti-statism and individualism get thrown into the mixture. Indeed, the authors argue that ‘the apparently ahistorical and incoherent character of anarchism is an artefact of the way in
which anarchism has been studied, rather than inherent in anarchism itself’ (44). In summary, then, their position is based on several ‘core theses’:

that the global anarchist movement emerged in the First International, that syndicalism is an integral part of the broad anarchist tradition, that this tradition centres on rationalism, socialism and anti-authoritarianism, that the writings of Mikhail Bakunin and Pyotr Kropotkin are representative of its core ideas, and that this ‘narrow’ definition is both empirically defensible and analytically useful.¹

Arriving at their definition, the authors then claim that anarchist doctrine is both strong (i.e. sound) and lucid as ideology. Although at least one reviewer has attacked Schmidt and van der Walt for taking this particular line, it has the significant virtue of lending structure and contour to the narrative sections that follow, and one assumes will also shape the promised world history of anarchism in the forthcoming second volume.

What about anarchism as a genuinely global tradition? Schmidt and van der Walt are to be commended for digging up accounts of largely forgotten anarchist moments around the world, as well as for their dismissal of ‘Spanish exceptionalism’ (273–275) but overall their argument so far is not entirely convincing – unproven rather than actually wrong. They freely admit that ‘large and sustained anarchist peasant movements or revolts are . . . rare’ (283), but there are obviously theoretical difficulties in arguing that anarchism is an essentially modern and proletarian movement while simultaneously hoping to find signs of libertarian activity in pre-capitalist societies.

South Africa is perhaps a special case, but as far as other African countries are concerned, much of the evidence that the authors manage to muster falls into two general categories, namely broad claims of anarcho-syndicalist influence in trade unions, and anti-colonial activism by anarchists and anarchist groups in metropolitan countries. Thus the authors mention in passing the ‘syndicalist-influenced ICU [that] was revived by Charles Mzingeli in the 1940s’ in Southern Rhodesia (347–348); they also write that the ‘Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU) spread across southern Africa in the 1920s and 1930s: its ideology was influenced by the IWW . . . ’ (272). They cite Tragic Week in Spain in 1909, when Catalan reservists refused mobilisation to fight in Morocco; the 1911 anarchist resistance to the brutal Italian occupation of Libya; or anarchist opposition to the introduction of compulsory military service in South Africa’s 1912 Defence Bill.

South Africa’s proletariat formed early, and European immigrants brought socialist ideas with them; the local anarchist tradition can therefore be traced as far back as Henry Glasse in the 1880s, and a local syndicalist movement was active by the 1910s. It seems likely that syndicalism and communism were closely intertwined and even heterodox tendencies at this time, with such figures as T.W. Thibedi and Andrew B. Dunbar playing key roles in the foundation of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), from which they were both later expelled. The authors do not hesitate, nevertheless, to claim both for the anarchist tradition.

This is all fascinating, but there seems to be little direct evidence of anarchist activity per se in (rather than about) colonial sub-Saharan Africa. To be fair, however, these concrete references constitute an enormous advance on the existing handful of feeble attempts by
anarchists to construct an African anarchist tradition. For example, the Nigerian Henry Dowa attempted in 1962 to claim the novelist Es’kia Mphahlele (1919–2008) as an anarchist on the basis of some vague expressions of individualism in his writings. Maurice Goldman, who studied at Wits and at Cape Town, was able to write sweepingly in the same issue that ‘the structure of African society… did not know boundaries’. Wisely, Schmidt and van der Walt pass by this type of contribution in silence. It must also be noted that we are promised more detailed accounts of anarchist and syndicalist movements in Africa, Asia and the Americas in the forthcoming second volume.

I should disclose that the authors mention me by name in the acknowledgements (3) and in several places reference is made to my work of the 1980s and early 1990s on the Ukrainian anarchist Nestor Makhno, work that is accurately described as ‘fairly hostile’ (266) to the anarchist project. Much of that work was devoted to demonstrating the fragility of any assertions at all about the class character of the Makhno revolt, a fragility that I suspect is also characteristic of much of the evidence about similar movements around the world.

Finally, it may be worth noting that the word ‘anarchist’, like ‘communist’ is currently widely used in the mass media as a term of abuse, a mere synonym for nihilist or even terrorist. During student demonstrations in London in December 2010 against the British government’s raising of fees for higher education, incidents of violence were pretty much uniformly attributed to ‘anarchists’. Schmidt and van der Walt’s book shows us that the real historical – and indeed contemporary – picture is much more complicated and much more interesting than a bunch of students throwing bricks at policemen. So, returning to the first two questions: anarchism? Probably not. This book? Definitely yes.

Notes

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The year 2007 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the death of Steve Biko. The Steve Biko Foundation and its partners launched the Biko 30:30 campaign, hosted a conference on development, held commemorations, and produced an exhibit with the Apartheid Museum. Publications followed, including We Write What We Like: Celebrating Steve Biko, Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko, and Black Man You are On Your Own, a republication of Saleem Badat’s section on the South African Student’s Organization (SASO) in Black Student Politics. A fresh scholarly interest in the Black