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To cite this article: Lucien van der Walt (2016): Back to the future: revival, relevance and route of an anarchist/syndicalist approach for twenty-first-century left, labour and national liberation movements, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/02589001.2016.1235365](https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2016.1235365)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2016.1235365>



Published online: 24 Oct 2016.



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Back to the future: revival, relevance and route of an anarchist/syndicalist approach for twenty-first-century left, labour and national liberation movements

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ABSTRACT

The failings of classical Marxism, social democracy and anti-imperialist nationalism point to the need for a radical left politics at a distance from the state. This paper examines the impact, revival and promise of the anarchist/syndicalist tradition, a rich, continuous praxis in labour, left, anti-imperialist, anti-racist and egalitarian movements, worldwide, since the 1860s. Outlining its core ideas – anti-hierarchy, anti-capitalism, anti-statism, opposition to social and economic inequality, internationalist class-based mobilisation – and critique of mainstream Marxism and nationalism, it highlights the arguments there is a basic incompatibility between state rule, and bottom-up, egalitarian, democratic, socialist relationships. The anarchist/syndicalist project cannot be reduced to an organising style, protest politics or spontaneism: for it, transition to a just, self-managed society requires organised popular capacity for a revolutionary rupture, developed through prefigurative, class-based, democratic organs of counter-power, including syndicalist unions aiming at collectivised property, and revolutionary counter-culture. Success needs formal organisation, unified strategy and anarchist / syndicalist political organisations.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 April 2015

Accepted 21 July 2016

KEYWORDS

Anarchism; syndicalism; unions; nationalism; Bakunin; revolution

Liberty without socialism is privilege, injustice; socialism without liberty is slavery and brutality

...

– Bakunin ([1867] 1971, 127)

The 1990s saw the exhaustion of the dominant progressive models of the short twentieth century: the Keynesian welfare state, associated with social democracy (in the so-called First World); centrally planned state-run economies, associated with Marxist governments (in the so-called Second World); and Import-Substitution-Industrialisation, associated with anti-imperialist nationalism (in the so-called Third World).¹ This had deep structural roots, including a global economic crisis, the globalisation of capital, popular unrest, and a changing geopolitical order (van der Walt 2015; Walton and Seddon 1994). It has proved impossible to revive the old models: while social democracy, classical Marxism and nationalism remain important political currents, neo-liberalism, in various permutations, is now the primary framework worldwide.

Since the 'enabling state' was central to the transformative projects of the 'three worlds' (Taylor 1991, 214–228), the end of the 'enabling state' meant a crisis for state-orientated radical politics, and so, a crisis for the much of the left project. This has had an enormous effect in Africa, where Marxist–Leninism and nationalism have been central to radical politics (e.g. Mayer 2016), and where neo-liberal programmes have generated immense suffering (Walton and Seddon 1994).

Yet the collapse of the old certainties (embodied in states, parties and official doctrines), and the end of the polarised cold war period (where independent alternatives were overshadowed), has also opened up space for renewed attention to modes of radical left politics that look beyond the state and statism.

Central to this process of renewal has been the growth of anarchism and syndicalism – the broad anarchist tradition – as both a diffuse influence on a range of struggles worldwide, and through the proliferation of anarchist/syndicalist organisations. Anarchism, including its trade union variant syndicalism, today exercises a considerable influence, including some unions. For example, a syndicalist summit in Paris, France, in 2007 drew 250 delegates from dozens of unions and labour groups, with Africans the largest continental presence (CNT-F 2007).

The contemporary movement draws upon – albeit in uneven ways – a rich body of theory and practice in labour, left, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and equal rights movements that goes back to the 1860s. This includes a significant history in northern and southern Africa (e.g. Hirsch and van der Walt 2014). It is often forgotten that mass, organised anarchist and syndicalist movements, some stronger than their Marxist and nationalist rivals, were common into the 1950s. Anderson reminded us anarchism was once the 'dominant element in the self-consciously internationalist radical Left', and 'the main vehicle of global opposition to industrial capitalism, autocracy, latifundism, and imperialism' (Anderson 2006, 2, 54). It is simply not possible to adequately understand the history of, for instance, unions and rural struggles in Latin America, or peasant and anti-imperialist struggles in East Asia, or anti-colonial and anti-racist movements in southern Africa, or labour and the left in Europe, without taking anarchism and syndicalism seriously (van der Walt 2011).

This paper examines the breadth, impact and insights of anarchism/syndicalism, and its possible relevance to twenty-first-century labour, left and national liberation movements. In doing so, it unpacks the core ideas, social critique, transformative vision and strategy of anarchism/syndicalism. It pays especial attention to its views on classes, state power, equality and emancipation and its critique of statist models like Marxism and nationalism. Finally, the paper examines some important challenges anarchism/syndicalism need to address, in order to consolidate and expand.

What is anarchism? And syndicalism?

It is essential, first, to reject the 'assumption that revolutionary Socialism is ... covered by the term "Marxism-Leninism"' (Schechter 1994, 1–2), and 'recall anarchism, which Leninist Marxism suppressed', and the 'democratic ideals' for which it 'served as a repository' (Dirlik 1991, 3–4, 7–8). Here, is necessary to reject some common misunderstandings. A long tradition defines anarchism as an ideology opposed to the state (e.g. Engels 1972, 71; Shatz 1971, xiii). But this is not very helpful. Classical Marxism also insisted that the state 'wither a

way' (Lenin 1975, 257, 281; Mao 1971, 372; Marx and Engels 1954, 56–57; Stalin 1942: 468–473). Liberalism too was antipathetic to the state, arguing for free markets as means of limiting state power (e.g. Friedman 1982, 23–36; Von Hayek 1944, 14–16, 52–57).

A more recent tendency to present anarchism as a 'sensibility', expressed in bottom-up decision-making and action, and/or a stress on prefiguring the future in today's struggles (e.g. Epstein 2001; also see Gordon 2007, 32–33), is also questionable. Bottom-up and democratic movements, and direct action, are not uniquely anarchist approaches. Prefiguration has no necessary link with anarchism either: Guevara, for example, insisted that, in his *foco* strategy, 'the guerrilla nucleus ... begins the construction of the future state apparatus', helping ensure the Marxist–Leninist vanguard party's 'seizure of power' (1967, 75, 83–84).

Such definitions are thus unable to distinguish anarchism from other currents. A more useful approach is to abstract the main features of anarchism from its history. The anarchist movement was born in the First International (1864–1877). A 'general awareness of an "anarchist" position did not exist until after the appearance of its representatives in the late 1870s; anarchism 'appeared to contemporaries ... a new phenomenon' (Fleming 1979, 16). The First International, a coalition of unions, radical groups and workers' organisations, was the site of fierce struggles over the direction of the working class and socialist movement. These debates led to the International splitting in 1872 into a smaller, New York-based wing, associated with Karl Marx (1818–1883), and a far larger, St. Imier-based wing, associated with the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876).

The anarchist movement flows in an intellectual and organisational lineage from that time to the present, and its core ideas can reasonably be said to be expressed in the works of its great luminaries, Bakunin and Piotr Kropotkin (1842–1921). Examined this way, anarchism is a rationalist, revolutionary form of libertarian socialism, emerging from the 1860s, opposed to social and economic hierarchy and inequality, and fighting for a radically democratic, global, delegate-based federation of worker and community councils rooted in assemblies, placing commonly owned means of production, coercion and administration under popular control, so enabling self-management, democratic planning from below and production for need, not profit (van der Walt 2011, 2016a, 2016b).

Anarchism's core premise is the value of individual freedom, which it insists is only possible through cooperative, egalitarian social relations. For 'freedom', Bakunin wrote, was 'above all, eminently social, because it can only be realised in society and by the strictest equality and solidarity among men' and women (Bakunin [1871a] 1971, 238). Thus:

A person who is dying from starvation, who is crushed by poverty, who every day is on the point of death from cold and hunger and who sees everyone he loves suffering likewise but is unable to come to their aid, is not free; that person is a slave. (Bakunin [1871a] 1985, 46)

It is on these grounds that anarchism rejects capitalism, landlordism and states (all seen as centralising wealth and power in the hands of small ruling classes), as well as the authoritarian family, and multiple forms of inequality, including gender, colonial, national and racial oppression. It aims, instead, at the revolutionary reconstruction of social relations, including interpersonal and familial ones, and the constitution of a universal human community based on voluntary cooperation. The anarchists sought, said Bakunin, 'to organise society in such a manner that every individual, man or woman, should find, upon entering life, approximately equal means for the development of his or her diverse faculties and

their utilization in his or her work' (Bakunin [1871] 1993).² This required a radically democratic and egalitarian society, constructed from below, through a strategy of revolutionary counter-power and counter-culture (see below).

Lest it be suggested that this is an unusual or novel definition, it should be stressed that this is the anarchism of notables like Bakunin, Kropotkin, Buenaventura Durruti, Emma Goldman, Errico Malatesta, Juan Carlos Mechoso, Lucy Parsons, Liu Sifu, Ricardo Flores Magón, Nestor Makhno, Kōtoku Shūsui, Shin Ch'aeho, and many others; of keystone organisations like the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) in Spain, the Korean People's Association in Manchuria (*Hanjok Chongryong Haphoi*), the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine, and of every significant anarchist movement; and the basis of the syndicalism of figures like T.W. Thibedi, Fred Cetiwe and Bernard Sigamoney, and of the entire syndicalist movement itself.

The positive content of anarchism, and its location in the working class and socialist movement, is elided by any reduction of anarchism to anti-statism. Anarchism is also not a 'sensibility' or rejection of systematic theory (cf. Feyerband 1975). The appropriation of the label by extreme individualist and irrationalist groups, especially in the U.S.A., should be rejected (see Bookchin 1995). Rather, anarchism is a coherent tradition of revolutionary left thought and action, historically located in the 'popular classes' – the broad working class and peasantry – and stressing class-based, internationalist emancipatory struggle.

The past in the present: today's global revival of anarchism, syndicalism

At the start of twenty-first century, several accounts noted that anarchists have been key to the 'most determined and combative of the movements' fighting capitalist globalisation (Meyer 2003, 218), with anarchism a major influence on 'today's radical young activists' (Epstein 2001, 1, 13–14). Ironically, these accounts missed out important parts of this resurgence. They focused on anarchism in the 'anti-globalisation' movement of the North Atlantic, and generally presented it as a 'submerged' influence and organising 'sensibility' (e.g. Epstein 2001; also see Gordon 2007, 32–33). Their framing leaves out other, central parts of the revival, which started earlier, took place in other struggles and other regions, and was often more consciously anarchist and syndicalist, more formally organised, and more enduring. For example, an overtly anarchist movement, dating back to the 1970s, is central to current rebellions in Greece, with thousands of adherents in hundreds of groups, both urban and rural (Drakonis 2014). Similarly, many core organisers of Occupy Wall Street in the U.S.A. were committed anarchists, consciously using the movement to promote anarchist ideas to the larger public (Bray 2013).

While 'there are only few places left where seriously Communist parties still exist', it is 'not difficult to find very energetic ... self-described anarchist (or syndicalist) groups around the world' (Anderson 2014, xiii). Anarcho- and revolutionary syndicalist unions remain the current's largest formations. African syndicalist initiatives since the 1980s include Algeria, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Uganda, the last three linked to the global Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In Asia, the substantial Siberian Confederation of Labour (SKT) dates back to 1989. Spain's General Confederation of Workers (CGT) had 70,000 members in 2004, and represented two million through works councils (Alternative Libertaire 2004). It emerged from a split in the CNT (formed 1910), which re-

emerged in 1975 from decades underground with 200,000 members. While CNT is affiliated to the International Workers Association (IWA, formed 1922, with 14 affiliates in 2012), SKT and CGT are in an alternative syndicalist network that includes, for example, some key Italian COBAS ('committees of the base').

Anarchist and syndicalist influences appear elsewhere. Syndicalist themes are part of a current revival of 'class struggle' unionism (Ness 2014). For instance, revolutionary syndicalism is an explicit reference point for the independent Solidarity-Unity-Democracy unions (SUD, formed 1988) of France and Switzerland. Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK, originally a Marxist–Leninist national liberation movement, formed 1974), recently adopted a model of stateless 'democratic confederalism', drawing on the late anarchist-influenced revolutionary Bookchin (Ross 2015).

Also problematic is the claim in recent accounts (which identify the contemporary anarchist resurgence with diffuse influences in the Western 'anti-globalisation' movement), that 'contemporary anarchism' is distinct from 'earlier generations' (e.g. Gordon 2007, 36–37), by supposedly having a richer critique of domination and a wider struggle repertoire (e.g. Purkis and Bowen 2004, 5, 7, 15). The notion of a break with 'classical' anarchism is flawed. Anarchism did not die out in the 1930s, only to be reborn in the 1990s. Anarchism and syndicalism remained major working class and peasant currents in many contexts after 1939, including, for example, Poland into the 1940s, Bolivia and China into the 1950s, Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Cuba into the 1960s, and Mexico and Korea into the 1970s, with major revivals elsewhere from 1968; the history is continuous (Hirsch and van der Walt 2014, 402–404).

Furthermore, many new movements, like IWW in Uganda (launched 2012), are often conscious successors of older formations. IWW, probably the largest U.S.A. syndicalist formation, has existed since 1905. Spain's CGT and CNT are part of an unbroken tradition dating to the Spanish Regional Federation (FORE, formed 1870), the First International's largest affiliate. The Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU, formed 1956) has been active in armed struggles, unions and student mobilisation since the 1950s (Jung and Díaz 2006). FAU is part of the Anarkismo network, formed 2005. Anarkismo linked 25 anarchist political groups worldwide, originated in developments in the 1990s, and based itself on 1920s Platformist and 1950s *especifist* texts. These argued for anarchist political groups based on theoretical and tactical unity and collective discipline – Bakunin's 1860s position.

Features presented as new – like concerns with interpersonal power relations, racism, imperialism and consumption – were actually integral to earlier anarchist and syndicalist generations, including those of Bakunin and Kropotkin (Hirsch and van der Walt 2014, 398–401). Also not new is the use of cultural struggle, the appropriation of public spaces, bottom-up organising, building transnational and cross-continental networks and broad alliances; or concern with opposing, not just economic exploitation, but all forms of oppression, and seeking emancipation, not just for the industrial proletariat, but for all the exploited (Hirsch and van der Walt 2014).

Politics beyond the politics of 'no'

The twenty-first century is marked by horror at the evils of contemporary society, like its massive inequalities in wealth and power, wars, economic instability, intolerance and discrimination – and a growing hope that a better world is possible. But these co-exist,

paradoxically, with the widespread loss of a vision for such a world, and of strategy to attain it. This situation arises from precisely the current crisis wracking much of the left project. There are valiant mass struggles against neo-liberalism, state repression and injustices, from the 1980s 'IMF riots' in Africa to the 1990s Zapatista insurgency, to the 'Arab Spring', and strikes against austerity in Western Europe, East Asia and southern Africa. But these struggles are largely defined by what they are against: *anti*-globalisation, *anti*-war, *anti*-privatisation, *anti*-capitalism.

With the retreat from visions of bold change, for 'the moment at least, the agenda is one of reform rather than revolution' (Hopkins 2002, 19). But reforms are rarely linked to clear alternatives; they are repeatedly blocked or captured by elites. Struggles have toppled authoritarian regimes from the 1980s, but the space opened has been filled, not with real alternatives or new social relations, but by neo-liberals (Chiluba in Zambia), rebranded oligarchies (Obama's Democrats), right-wing capitalist demagogues (Trump; Modi in India), and populist gambles (Chávez's '21st century socialism', funded by oil price wind-falls). New, left formations have emerged (like SYRIZA in Greece), but their mildly social-democratic programmes have proved unworkable.

Parliamentarism has spread dramatically, but for many it seems evident that voters have no real say in decisions, and that elected officials get co-opted into small ruling classes. As Bakunin insisted, 'the most imperfect republic is a thousand times better than the most enlightened monarchy', but parliament is *not* democracy ([1867] 1971, 144). Formal rights offer some protection from state officials and capitalists, and are the product of popular struggles (Rocker [1938] 1989) but they are constrained and eroded by deep inequalities in power and wealth.

The above conditions form the context for a rise in the crudest forms of identity politics, of nationalist and other right-wing demagoguery, and of growing religiosity, concentrated among the strictest denominations (Hooper et al. 2010). The great irony has been the dismissal of class politics and the 'ascendancy of postmodern ideas' despite a 'demographically much larger process of proletarianisation' than that of 'the West ... in all its history' and the need for rational, socialist solutions (Ahmed 2011, 14).

For anarchism/syndicalism, a progressive alternative requires an overarching vision of a new, decent society, and a clear strategy to get there, able to link a range of struggles and demands and social forces to a project of developing organisations and ideas able to challenge, then supplant, the existing order. This requires, in turn, radical organisations that can win the battle of ideas in an open, democratic manner, among large numbers of people – and action *outside*, and *against*, the state. The reasoning is that, without politics, organisation and a programme, little is achieved. This requires a conscious attention to theory (rather than its dismissal as 'dogma'), to strategy (rather than a fetishisation of immediate struggles), and to a realistic understanding of the need for, and the challenges facing, a transition to a new society (without a new order, the old problems will continue; but the old order will not fade quietly in the face of proliferating local struggles nor be destroyed by experiments with alternative institutions). Daily struggles and organising can prefigure a different, better world, but are inadequate. Only a coordinated, decisive revolutionary rupture can change society. Therefore it is not enough to focus only on immediate issues, or to praise the ways in which current initiatives can or do prefigure something better. It is essential to be clear on what order *is* desired, and so, what *should* be prefigured, and then consider *how* to move from prefiguration to figuration.

Bakunin insisted that without a revolutionary vision – the vision of an anarchist future, and of the means to reach it – the popular classes will be doomed to repeat an endless cycle: revolutions come and go, but ruler merely replaces ruler, exploiter merely replaces exploiter. He stressed, therefore, the need for a ‘new social philosophy’, a ‘new faith’ in the possibility of a new social order, and in the ability of ordinary people to create it ([1871c] 1971, 249–251). Struggles, social movements and labour unions form, from this perspective, an essential bridge to a better society, but crossing the bridge requires the accumulation of a widespread popular capacity, organised as well as ideological, to supplant the existing order with a better one. This requires, in turn, clear political perspectives, winning the battle of ideas among the majority, and bringing immense social forces – the popular classes – into play.

This is what the PKK in Rojava, Syria, has arguably shown. The ‘Arab Spring’ largely ended in winter: demands for parliamentary democracy ended with the election of right-wing and/or neo-liberal forces (e.g. Egypt) or wars involving the old regime, Islamist right-wingers and imperialist forces (e.g. Libya and Syria). But the PKK, with an already strong, rooted organisation, a mass base and an emancipatory programme, was able to use the situation to implement, and militarily defend, a radical, inclusive, multi-ethnic bottom-up order.

Strategy: democratic counter-power and revolutionary counter-culture

Historically, anarchists stressed building alternative organisations *in struggle* against the ruling class, which could also form the *levers* for revolution, and the *nucleus* of new self-managed, egalitarian social order. One part of the strategy was building a popular revolutionary movement – centred on organs of counter-power. Building counter-power meant building bottom-up, democratic mass organisations that could resist, then defeat, and supplant, ruling classes. But since a revolutionary movement required a ‘new social philosophy’ (Bakunin) – militancy and movements were not enough – this had to be accompanied by building revolutionary counter-culture (that is, a counter-hegemonic worldview). Both elements needed to exist outside of, indeed, against the state, including its elections and corporatism, since they follow a completely different logic (see below). The revolution was, effectively, the extension of counter-power across economy and society, through the abolition of the ruling class; democratic counter-power was the new, emerging within the framework of the old.

For most, this required ‘mass anarchism’, an approach arguing that mass movements able to change society were best built through struggles around immediate issues and reforms, for example, wages, police racism, high prices. What was crucial was that reforms were won *from below* – rather than granted from above, which undermined popular movements – and that struggles helped build democratic, independent mass organisations based on self-activity and radical consciousness (Rocker 1989). These formations would consolidate gains and advance further struggle, and provide space for fostering revolutionary counter-culture. Anarchists needed to participate in such organisations (e.g. the First International), to radicalise and transform them into levers of revolutionary rupture.

Syndicalism was always a central ‘mass anarchist’ *strategy*, and the first syndicalist unions emerged not in the 1890s (as often supposed), but dated to the First International: Spain’s FORE and the General Congress of Mexican Workers (formed 1876). It argued for revolutionary unions, built through daily struggles, democratic practice and popular

education, and wielding power at the point of production. Irreplaceable organs of counter-power and sites of revolutionary counter-culture, independent of the state and its parties, they built popular capacity, including union structures able to seize and self-manage the means of production (Rocker 1989). For Bakunin, such unions were 'living seeds of the new society', erecting 'upon the ruins of the old world the free federation of workers' associations' ([1871c] 1971, 255).

Syndicalism envisages bottom-up, direct-action-based, and inclusive unionism, organising across divisions and borders, and addressing a broad range of social and political issues. It rejects bureaucratic unionism and the belief that unions should engage in electing political parties. The aim is rather a revolutionary 'general strike', involving workplace take-overs and the re-orientation of production as part of creating the new society.

Anti-authoritarian class politics, non-class oppression and national liberation

While opposing all forms of oppression, anarchism/syndicalism always placed especial emphasis on class divisions, advocating class-based politics. This should not be construed as a crude 'workerism'. Anarchism/syndicalism always understood the 'working class' in very broad terms, and viewed the peasantry as a revolutionary force. The working class included *all* wage workers who lacked control of their work and did not exploit, whether in agriculture, industry or services, including white collar and casual workers, workers' families and the unemployed. The peasantry included all small farmers not exploiting labour, and exploited by other classes, including tenant farmers.

But *why* class struggle? First, class is a form of oppression affecting the popular classes, the great majority of humankind. It is impossible to create a free society without abolishing classes. It is possible, in some situations to end gender, colonial, national and racial oppression within the existing order. For example, the U.S.A., a former colony, is now an imperialist – it is no longer a victim of imperialism. But class is an irremovable feature of existing society.

Class is also a unique form of oppression: *only* classes are exploited *and* dominated, and class exploitation, centred in production, is essential to funding ruling classes and states. Changing the gender, national or racial etc. composition of capitalists, judges, top officials, generals etc., does not remove class or exploitation. Only exploited classes have an interest in, and capacity to, abolish exploitation: only the popular classes can create a free society, because only they do not require exploitation to exist (Arshinov and Makhno 1989, 14–15).

Abolishing classes requires a social revolution, a great task but feasible, it is argued, because of the popular classes' numbers, ability to organise, and structural power as the producers of wealth. The popular classes cannot be emancipated unless unified, and common class interests, experiences and interests make such unity possible. Class oppression exists globally, meaning that class-based struggle is by its nature, internationalist and crosses lines like gender, nation and race. Further, Bakunin insists, 'the question of the revolution ... can be solved only on the grounds of internationality' ([1869] 1985, 14) because isolated revolutions are weak, isolated and inadequate.

'Non-class' oppression by gender, nationality, race etc. affects people of all classes. But different classes have different aims in fighting non-class oppressions: elites in oppressed groups do not aim to abolish class, but to remove barriers frustrating their intrinsic class needs, as exploiters and rulers. Anarchists/syndicalists oppose all oppression on principle,

and therefore fight ‘non-class’ as well as class oppression. However, they aim to connect all struggles into a *unified* fight to end all oppression, in a way consistent with anarchist principles and goals – including abolishing classes. Struggles against oppression are also immensely strengthened when popular class power is brought to bear by, for example, political strikes.

Capitalism, landlordism and the state play a major role in the creation and reproduction of ‘non-class’ oppressions: for example, racist land enclosure and repressive labour systems in apartheid South Africa were rooted, in substantial part, in the drive of agricultural and mining capital, British imperialism and the local state for cheap, unfree black labour. Not only does the complete abolition of such oppressions require removal of all the forces generating them, but it also a radical redistribution of wealth and power to uproot them and their legacy. Following this reasoning, for example, ending endemic black working suffering in today’s South Africa requires revolutionary social changes, and the defeat of the ruling class – impossible without class-based revolution.

Anarchism/syndicalism proposes, rather, that all emancipatory struggles must make the popular classes’ needs paramount. For Bakunin ([1867] 1971, 99):

Every exclusively political revolution – be it in defence of national independence or for internal change ... – that does not aim at the immediate and real political and economic emancipation of people will be a false revolution. Its objectives will be unattainable and its consequences reactionary.

Therefore, while anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, for example, have been central to its historic praxis, the movement has fought to ensure these assumed a revolutionary, socialist character, and battled against both foreign *and* local elites (Hirsch and van der Walt 2014). Class-based organising helps prevent gender, national and other liberation struggles being hijacked by the elite class ‘element’ seeking to capture state power to advance its exploitative ‘group ... interest’ (Arshinov 1987, 31). This ‘element’ is, unsurprisingly, extremely hostile to class struggle, and continually hides its narrow interests by stressing non-class identities (and politics) like nation (and nationalism) and race (and racism).

For anarchists/syndicalists, the popular classes have an interest in fighting all oppression, including ‘non-class’ oppression. The great majority of victims of these oppressions are working class and peasant people, who also experience them in their most severe forms. ‘Non-class’ oppressions divide the popular classes and worsen the conditions of *all* sectors: they divide the masses with prejudices, and generate pools of cheap labour that drive all conditions down. Fighting for equality is also part of prefiguring a free future. The anarchist/syndicalist approach, in sum, does not juxtapose class struggle with the struggle against other forms of oppression, but, rather, sees the struggle against all forms of oppression as a *core* part of the class struggle to radically change society (van der Walt 2016a). Class-based unity is essential for human emancipation, but impossible unless it involves actively fighting against ‘non-class’ oppressions.

Open class analysis, the critique of the state, nationalism and Marxism–Leninism

Anarchists and syndicalists do not actually mean precisely the same as Marxists when defining ‘class’.³ For Bakunin, class involved inequitable ‘ownership’ of means of

production *as well as* means of coercion and administration. Crudely, means of production are productive resources, for example, raw materials, machines; means of coercion are instruments of force, for example, weapons; means of administration are instruments of governance, for example, bureaucracies. 'Ownership' here includes various forms of legal title enabling control, as well as the *de facto* control of, such means.⁴ Class inequalities are expressed in social relations of *production* and social relations of *domination* between classes, involving a majority of non-'owners' and a minority of 'owners'. Relations of production involve the exploitation of the popular classes by owners, while relations of domination involve the subjugation of the popular classes by owners.

In modern society, ownership of means of production centres on capitalists ('bourgeoisie'),⁵ although landlordism remains important – and corporations constitute the primary method of organising exclusive, class ownership of these means. Ownership of means of coercion and administration centres on 'state managers', like senior officials, judges, military heads, mayors, and parliamentarians – and states are the primary method of organising exclusive, class ownership of these means. The state, as a hierarchical organisation ruling a territory, enables small elites to centralise vast resources against the majority. A strong state, Bakunin insisted, could have 'only one solid foundation: military and bureaucratic centralisation' ([1873] 1971, 337).

Together these private/'economic' and state/'political' elites constitute what can best be called a 'ruling class': capitalists are only a *part* of this class, and it is therefore misleading to call it – as some anarchists and syndicalists persist in doing – a 'capitalist' class. Rather, capitalists, landlords and state managers are class *fractions*. This understanding of class differs from, for example, both Weber and Marx, who saw class in primarily economic terms (for Weber, life chances, and 'exclusively ... economic interests' (1946, 181); for Marx, ownership of means of production).

While some anarchists and syndicalists embraced an economic determinism that posited the primacy of capitalists, and so, tended towards derivative and instrumentalist theory of states, Bakunin and others developed a more open, richer class analysis. Bakunin argued, for example, that capitalists were not necessarily the dominant fraction, and that the dynamics of the ruling class need not be reduced to wealth accumulation. The logic of capital, and the logic of the state, while similar, were not identical. Corporations competed to increase the capital, living and dead, under their control, while states competed to increase the territory and populations under theirs. Capitalist competition was *paralleled* by geopolitical rivalry, arising from a competitive state system, but that system did not follow a capitalist logic: 'every state, to exist not on paper but in fact, and not at the mercy of neighbouring states, and to be independent, must inevitably strive to become an invasive, aggressive, conquering state' ([1873] 1971, 339).

For anarchists/syndicalists following this line, Marxists like Lenin were correct in claiming that the state was a 'body of armed men' that defended capitalism (Lenin [1917] 1964). However, Lenin misunderstood the relationship. The state was not a mere instrument of the capitalists, but had its own *irreducible* imperatives – the drive for sovereignty ('to exist ... in fact': Bakunin) and expanding control of territory and people ('to become an invasive ... state'). These help explain both states' support for capitalists *and* their autonomy from capitalists.

State managers' 'ownership' of means of coercion and administration, within a competitive interstate system, imposes distinct imperatives. Precisely because state managers'

military-organisational power rests upon powerful economies, states have sought to develop powerful economies – in the modern era, this means industrial and capitalist ones. But simultaneously, their ‘ownership’ of major resources like guns, courts, jails, officialdom etc. means they have an independent resource base, which enables them to act autonomously. State managers *must* act, to some extent, independently, of capitalists (and landlords), and they *can* do so as well.

This model is borne out by an extensive literature on development experiences. The weaker the capitalists, argued Gerschenkron (1944), the greater the state role in economic modernisation, since the state needed capitalism. Where necessary, state managers deliberately generated the capitalists. In *Meiji* Japan, the state established the main industries and deliberately fostered a strong bourgeoisie, while in contemporary China, the state harnessed foreign direct investment (for geostrategic aims Johnson 1982; Lardy 1992).

Economic and political elites cooperate, since they have convergent interests in maintaining class exploitation and domination. Strong states need effective capitalists, since capitalist accumulation funds the military and bureaucratic resources that maintained and expanded state power. Strong capitalists need effective states, since these provide administrative and coercive resources that enable capitalist accumulation. Each requires and reinforces the other. In this sense, Kropotkin argued, the ‘state ... and capitalism are inseparable concepts’, ‘bound together ... by the bond of cause and effect, effect and cause’ ([1912] 1970, 181). Thus, the basis of contemporary society is ‘the enslavement of the vast majority of the people by an insignificant minority, and ... it is precisely this purpose which is served by the state’ (Arshinov and Makhno [1926] 1989, 18).

Furthermore, relations of production and domination are often deeply intertwined. States can run corporations, exploit labour and realise surplus value, while corporations routinely control extensive coercive and administrative means. Capitalists sometimes accumulate wealth in order to obtain political power, while politicians often use the state to accumulate wealth. These overlaps are not essential to either side – a state, for example, can exist without state corporations – but are common. However, the immediate agendas of capitalists and the state managers can clash (for instance, over tax rates or labour laws); and one side can act to undermine the other (for instance, inept or predatory state managers can frustrate accumulation e.g. Onimode [1986]). There are also splits and conflicts *within* both capitalist and state manager ‘fractions’: capitalists battle capitalists, state states, and corporations and states are internally divided by departmental rivalries, factions, party-political affiliations, sectoral differences, national and racial divides etc. Divisions also span economic and political elites, with, for example, particular capitalist groups aligning with particular state departments.

Several strategic issue points follow, once these claims are accepted. First, states, as much as capitalist corporations, are viewed as essentially incompatible with freedom and equality for the popular classes; both are reliant on the subjugation and exploitation of the popular classes. Secondly, any group taking state power – including anti-imperialist nationalists, Marxists, and social-democrats – will either replace the old ruling class or join it: the situation of the popular classes will, in essential ways, remain unchanged. Those with state power always, regardless of ideology, intent, sincerity or social origin, constitute part of an oppressive ruling class. Thus Bakunin’s view that ([1873] 1971, 338):

... the people will feel no better if the stick with which they are being beaten is labelled the 'people's stick.' ... No state ... not even the reddest republic – can ever give the people what they really want ...

Any emancipatory strategy based upon the capture of state power, peacefully or otherwise, necessarily reproduces the current problem of class domination and authoritarian centralisation. Those who hold state power are, regardless of ideology, intent or social origins, a section of the ruling class, including the most radical politicians. The state can not be used for popular emancipation: it is an intrinsic part of the class system, and dependent upon exploitation for its very income. A new leadership in the state, regardless of colour, nationality or gender, is simply a personnel change for part of the ruling class. Activists do not change the state; the state changes them. Nationalist governments will be controlled by a 'new bureaucratic aristocracy', 'enemies of the people' in place of foreign elites (Bakunin [1873] 1971, 343). The Marxist–Leninist programme of nationalisation of means of production by a revolutionary state will generate 'centralised state-capitalism' (Kropotkin [1912] 1970, 186). These new elites will embrace their situation, even if they still mouth the slogans of freedom and justice: it is the 'characteristic of ... every privileged position to kill the hearts and minds of men' (Bakunin [1871a] 1971, 228). These theses seem borne out by the histories of newly independent, post-colonial states, as well as the experience of Marxist–Leninist regimes.

Divisions within the ruling class are secondary conflicts that can be resolved, as opposed to the primary conflict between classes, which are irreconcilable. While, third, a ruling class does not have a master plan, a unified vision or even a wise leadership, it does have *permanent* organisations – corporations and states – that continually maintain its rule despite its internal conflicts, and also provide a means to resolve internal conflicts and develop shared strategies. The popular classes, by contrast, are normally kept in a state of division, ignorance and division.

The aim of democratic counter-power/revolutionary counter-culture can be seen, from this angle, as redressing this asymmetry by building strong movements that unite the popular classes organisationally, strategically, ideologically – and through struggle. Such formations are the negation of corporations and states: mass-based, bottom-up, democratic, egalitarian, they build the capacity for emancipatory, revolutionary change.

Logic of self-management, counter-power vs. logic of class rule, states

If, like Weber, anarchists and syndicalists viewed the state as a centralised organisation claiming a monopoly of force within a given territory (Giddens 1971, 156), they rejected Weber's view that bureaucratic state centralisation was a *technical* necessity for large-scale administration in complex societies. Rather, they viewed state centralisation as arising from a *social* necessity in class society: a minority could rule only when coercive and administrative power was concentrated in a few hands, and decisions flowed downwards from it, in a chain of command, to the popular classes. This was necessary *only* if an undesirable social order was retained. While the state was fairly efficient as a means of ensuring minority class rule, it was profoundly *inefficient* in other ways. It crippled popular self-activity (Bakunin [1871b] 1971, 269), and was unable to deal effectively with 'all the numberless affairs of the community' (Kropotkin [1887] 1970, 50). It was an

'enormous cemetery, where all the real aspirations, all the living forces of a country' end up 'slain and buried' (Bakunin [1871b] 1971, 269).

There is a fundamental incompatibility between the logics of state power and popular self-management. As a centralised organisation for class domination, the state is antithetical to real democracy, self-management and equality. In this regard, Bakunin wrote: 'It would be obviously impossible for some hundreds of thousands or even some tens of thousands or indeed for only a few thousand men to exercise this [state] power' (Bakunin [1872] 1971, 281).

Even in its most democratic form, parliamentarism, the state reduces popular political participation to ballots every few years (with perhaps some nominal consultation between elections). A representative democracy excludes voters from any real role in governing, beyond a few minutes in poll stations, and reading the news. And no state is ever a representative democracy: it comprise a large, unelected, centralised army, police and bureaucracy, its bonded to the ruling class, and the elected representatives were simply parts of this machine. Thus, the 'day after election[s] everybody goes about his business, the people go back to toil anew, the bourgeoisie to reaping profits and political conniving' and the 'people are committed to ruinous policies, all without noticing' (Bakunin [1870] 1971, 220–222).

There was, the anarchists and syndicalists insisted, a radical *contradiction* between bottom-up self-democracy and the state apparatus, and a basic antagonism between the logic of a project of counter-power/counter-culture, and the logic of capitalism and the state. The most dramatic example of this contradiction was, perhaps, the Russian Revolution, where the Bolshevik state, taking power in the name of the working class and peasantry, soon acted against the *soviets* (peasants', workers', sailors' and soldiers' councils), factory committees, left formations, trade unions and peasant movements. When the soldiers and sailors of Kronstadt base at Petrograd rose in March 1921 in the wake of general strikes in the city, demanding a free press, open *soviet* elections, the release of left-wing political prisoners and strikers (including anarchists), and an end to forced grain requisitions, Trotsky rejected 'the workers' right to elect representatives above the Party', because the party was 'entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers democracy' (in Nove 1990, 181).

It is precisely this antagonism – and the deeper conflictual class relations upon which it is founded – that, for anarchism/syndicalism, requires that the popular project of counter-power/culture overwhelm and supplant states and corporations through a final, decisive show-down, that is, revolution.

Anarchism/syndicalism: democracy, pluralism and socialism without the state

While agreeing with the liberals' stress on inalienable rights and their suspicion of the state, anarchists and syndicalists rejected capitalism and free markets. Free market theory served the 'interests of the exploiters' (Kropotkin [1912] 1970, 182–183). They shared the Marxist view that capitalism was exploitative, but denied the Marxist claim that capitalism was a stage towards socialism. While adopting many elements of Marxist economics (e.g. Bakunin [1871] 1993), they insisted that capitalism was not an innovative, competitive system. Even in its most dynamic phases, it involved oligopoly,

underproduction, distorted economies and wasted resources (Bekken 2009). Innovation came from artisans, scientists and workers, not the bourgeoisie (Kropotkin [1892] 1990).

The anarchist project aimed at individual freedom through socio-economic equality, requiring a new order – which Kropotkin dubbed ‘anarchist-communism’ – without exploitation, capitalism, markets, commodities, rents, states and corporations (or other centralised organisations enabling minority rule), and freed of oppression. Here individuals could develop to their full potential through cooperation, a ‘true individuality’ involving, said Kropotkin, ‘the highest communist sociability’ ([1902] 1970, 296–297). Individual freedom would be expressed, not through competition, but by egalitarian relations, communal duties and cooperation, democratic decision-making and social and economic equality. Society, ‘far from decreasing ... freedom, on the contrary creates the individual freedom of all human beings’ (Bakunin [1871a] 1971, 236–237).

None of this is possible without recognising the principle that a person’s ‘duties to society are indissolubly linked with his rights’ (Bakunin [1867] 1971, 118). The system has ‘as its essential basis *equality and collective labour*’ (emphasis in the original) (Bakunin [1872] 1971, 289). Without production, the society will collapse; besides, it is fair that everybody contribute to ‘the common well-being to the full extent of his capacities’ (Kropotkin [1887] 1970, 56, 59). Everyone benefits, and the evils of an idle few living off the labour of many others are said to be shown by capitalism and landlordism. Once labour is freed, work will become more pleasant and meaningful (CNT [1936] n.d., 4; Kropotkin [1892] 1990).

Anarchist ethics, substantive equality and meaningful democracy are the means to negate domination and exploitation, and require that productive, coercive and administrative resources move from the ruling classes’, to the popular classes’ control. This abolishes class division, and enables the reorientation and restructuring of these resources. If the ‘whole proletariat’ is in charge, then there is ‘no government, no state’, as there are no longer ‘those who are ruled and ... are slaves’ (Bakunin [1873] 1971, 330). Or, as Price recently argued, ‘Anarchism is democracy without the state’ (2007, 172).

The abolition of the state does not mean the end of coordination, rules or decision-making, but a merger of these functions with the mass of the people through assemblies, councils and federations that enable control over all major resources. This radical redistribution of wealth and power enables the abolition of exploitation, the reconstruction of work as an empowering activity, and the end of social and economic inequality. Infused with a new ethics, the new society will consciously eradicate poverty, remove class, redress race/national, gender inequalities etc. promote a rationalist worldview and technological innovation, and create, at last, a universal human community.

Anarchism clearly did not ‘reject’ modern theory or modernity (cf. Pepper 1993, 202); rather it sought a *revolutionary modernity*, in which science, technology and reason were used for human emancipation, with history consciously designed by human action (Bookchin 1977, 29–30). Thus Bakunin embraces the ‘absolute authority of science’ in knowledge generation ([1871a] 1971, 230–233) and a universal ‘general scientific education’ ([1873] 1971, 327), while Kropotkin insists that anarchist social analysis must follow scientific methods ([1912] 1970, 150). Bakunin and Kropotkin devote extensive writing not just to revolutionary strategy, therefore, but also to discussions of future issues like self-management, popular participation in decision-making, crime and punishment, educational methods, the redesign of work to break down sharp mental/

manual and executive/operative distinctions, and democratic rights and political pluralism in 'anarchist-communism' (e.g. [1866] 1971; [1871c] 1971; [1872] 1998; Kropotkin, [1899] 1974; [1892] 1990).

While promoting rationalism, the 'anarchist-communist' social order evidently had an ethical basis: effectively, it was a voluntary association premised on the value of individual freedom, created through democratic organisations with mass popular support by widespread acceptance of its vision. This did mean a certain amount of agreement with its basic values could be assumed at its inception. However, dissidents would have complete access to its democratic spaces. For Bakunin, anarchist society will guarantee the 'absolute and complete' freedom of speech (to 'voice all opinions' without repression) and freedom of association (including associations promoting 'the undermining (or destruction) of individual and public freedom') (Bakunin [1866] 1971, 79). Not only was such freedom intrinsically desirable, and a central goal of the new society, but a free society destroyed itself when it permitted only a narrow range of views, not recognising that freedom included the freedom to disagree or hold unpopular views. Thus, 'every command slaps liberty in the face' (Bakunin [1871a] 1971, 240).

Indeed, if a clear majority decided, *through the democratic process*, to (for instance) replace 'anarchist-communism' with neo-liberal capitalism under a military regime then this *must* be allowed to take place. Anarchists deemed such an occurrence exceedingly unlikely, given the advantages of the new system and a rationalist education and public culture, but recognised that a free society involves indeterminate outcomes to its democratic processes. Conversely, for a minority to coerce a majority to be 'free' was completely inconsistent with anarchist positions. Freedom meant freedom for everybody, Bakunin insisting ([1871a] 1971, 236–237):

I am truly free only when all human beings, men and women, are equally free, and the freedom of other men, far from negating or limiting my freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary premise and confirmation.

However, freedom was not absolute; the basic principle was that people should be free to do as they wished so long as this did not violate the rights of others. Sabotaging the democratic process, forcibly undermining the democratic system, the use of violence in disputes, and other crimes against persons – including exploitation – were at odds with a free society. A minority could not be permitted to coerce the majority into (to return to the example) neo-liberalism and military dictatorship but it had every right to promote its views and try *persuade* people.

Post-Marxists sometimes claim that a class-based project involves an inherently authoritarian 'Jacobin imaginary' that assumes the masses have (or ought to have) a 'perfectly unitary and homogenous collective will' (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 2). Yet anarchism and syndicalism show that a revolutionary class politics, centred on a lively and unrestricted democratic process, is theoretically possible and historically real. The anarchists themselves promote the revolution, defend the new order, and participate in it, but never strive to rule as a party or an elite; on the contrary, they seek to 'give free rein' to the masses, based on 'unconditional freedom' and struggle against 'all ambition to dominate the revolutionary movement of the people' by 'cliques or individuals' (Bakunin [n.d.] 1980, 387).

Lessons: rise and fall and rise of anarchism/syndicalism

Anarchism and syndicalism offer, then, not just a profound critique of the current order, but a vision of a new and better world; it also suggests, as has been shown, a strategy to achieve that world that avoids the failures of social democracy, Marxism–Leninism and anti-imperialism – all of which failed to keep their own promises of sustained material improvements for the popular classes, and built class-ridden, inegalitarian and unpopular orders.

Anarchism and syndicalism also have a long record of building and influencing powerful movements that made a real imprint on society (e.g. van der Walt 2011, 2016a, 2016b). Even a modest survey of this record goes beyond the scope of this paper (and is impossible in the available space). Some data were provided in the early part of this paper, but other aspects can also be noted. For example, the movement played an important role in colonial and post-colonial countries, including in struggles against imperialism and national oppression, including in Algeria, Bulgaria, China, Czechia, Cuba, Egypt, Georgia, India, Ireland, Korea, Macedonia, Mexico, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Taiwan and Ukraine (e.g. Hirsch and van der Walt 2014). But a popular impact only took place when the movement was able to relate, in a realistic way, to the big issues and struggles of the time, and avoid the pitfalls of purist abstention or political liquidation into uncritical supporters of other currents.

Today, there is a worldwide revival of anarchism and syndicalism, a new wave. Its agenda and theory are heavily contested; its activities and approach differ substantially between regions; its ability to consolidate its protest power into large mass movements capable of constructive social change remains to be seen; some who identify as ‘anarchists’ actually have a very tenuous, sometimes non-existent, link to the tradition.

What all anarchist history has shown is that if anarchists and syndicalists fail to organise on the basis of a clear programme and unitary organisation – with shared tactical and theoretical positions, and collective responsibility – they will lose the opportunities presented to better organised rivals, many sponsored by states and capitalists. As Platformism and *especificismo* stress (Arshinov and Makhno 1989, 12):

Anarchism is not a beautiful utopia, nor an abstract philosophical idea, it is a social movement of the labouring masses. For this reason it must gather its forces in one organisation, constantly agitating, as demanded by reality and the strategy of class struggle.

Anarchists are one current, for instance, in the ‘anti-globalisation’ movement and syndicalists one current in the unions: without a clear programme, and concerted work, they can be displaced, their agenda defeated. A programme requires a clear strategy and a clear strategy is only possible from a thorough grounding in the history and theory of the anarchist and syndicalist tradition. This involves clearing away the mystifications created by poor scholarship, academic fads like postmodernism, and the appropriation of the label ‘anarchism’ for individualist, irrationalist and rightist tendencies that have nothing in common with anarchism or syndicalism. This requires the formation of specific political groups that can fight for the leadership of the anarchist idea and an anarchist/syndicalist strategy and outcome, including within mass movements and campaigns, including within unions, and as part of fights for small reforms as well as major changes. This seems to be essential for the project of counter-power/counter-culture to succeed. And

so, too, is a realistic appreciation of the need for coordinated, including military, defence of any revolution.

In conclusion: counter-power, syndicalism and prefiguration

As an alternative to the reliance of social democracy, classical Marxism and anti-imperialist nationalism on the 'enabling state', Bakunin and Kropotkin insisted that a new, better society has to be created from below, through the self-managed struggles by bottom-up, emancipatory, and politicised movements of the popular classes, that is, the broad working class and the peasantry. These movements must embody in the *present* the forms and values that they sought to achieve in the future. To use hierarchy would be to reproduce it; tomorrow, in other words, should be built today.

A 'new social philosophy' (Bakunin) had to animate popular movements of counter-power that prefigured the new society, that were built in struggle, that operated *outside and against the state* as well as capital, and that united the popular classes in a revolutionary front. Such a movement had to engage in struggles around reforms, but it must aim, ultimately, to constitute the basis of a new society within the shell of the old, an incipient new social order that would ultimately explode the old one, and supersede it.

Thus, counter-power driven by revolutionary counter-culture aimed to replace the power of the old order, creating a new society in which, through democracy, freedom, equality and socialised resources, power was held by everyone. In this schema, power was *not* abolished; it was, in fact, taken *by everyone*. In the words of Makhno, a key figure in the anarchist Ukrainian Revolution (quoted in Arshinov 1987, 58):

... we will not conquer in order to repeat the errors of the past years, the error of putting our fate into the hands of new masters; we will conquer in order to take our destinies into our own hands, to conduct our lives in accordance with our own will ...

Notes

1. I use these terms with caution, aware of their problems.
2. Not paginated.
3. I am expressing the core theses in a precise conceptual language, noting there is no standardised terminology for, and little academic work on, anarchist class theory, for example, Szeleynyi and Martin (1988).
4. Expanding Wright's use of 'economic ownership' as 'control of the overall investment and accumulation process' (1978, 71).
5. Including *de facto* 'owners' like senior managers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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