

Under the Black Flag Anarchist Histories

Mark Leier

Volume 65, Spring 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt65re03>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Leier, M. (2010). Under the Black Flag: Anarchist Histories. *Labour / Le Travail*, 65, 175–180.

REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Under the Black Flag: Anarchist Histories

Mark Leier

Goyens, Tom, *Beer and Revolution: The German Anarchist Movement in New York City, 1880–1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2007)

Schmidt, Michael, Lucien van der Walt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* (Oakland, Edinburgh: AK Press 2009)

McLaughlin, Paul, *Anarchism and Authority: A Philosophical Introduction to Classical Anarchism* (Aldershot, Burlington: Ashgate 2007)

ANARCHISM IS INCREASINGLY filling the role that Marxism did in the 1970s and 1980s, providing a new generation of academics and activists with a framework to make links between theory and practice and excavate the history of movements that have been ignored and marginalized. In fields such as philosophy, anthropology, history, and political science, many have been turning to anarchism to hold accountable the oppressive liberalism of the twenty-first century and a Marxism that is often burdened with a sclerotic scholasticism. As a result, anarchism as a theoretical project and as a subject of historical investigation has flourished over the last ten years.

Three recent books demonstrate some of the diversity, sophistication, and energy of anarchist historical studies. In *Beer and Revolution*, Tom Goyens uses the insights of authors who cross political and epistemological craft lines, such as Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, and Edward Soja, to reveal how New York's early German anarchist movement "produced space and inscribed it with meaning." (7) Goyens uses the "spatial dimension" to focus on how the German anarchists established "a way of life in the here and now," (8) and his meticulous research and spirited prose take us to the anarchist beer halls, clubs, schools, and picnics where the movement's slogans and iconography were hung with care, the songs were sung with fervour, and the fiery speeches

Mark Leier, "Under the Black Flag: Anarchist Histories," *Labour/Le Travail*, 65 (Spring 2010), 175–180.

were met with huzzahs. Using memoirs, the anarchist press and pamphlets, archival collections, and the mainstream press, Goyens has reconstructed much of the daily life of the community in a lively and energetic book.

The attention to “space,” however, sometimes conceals as much as it reveals. The theories of Lefebvre and others are sketched and used very lightly, and there is little attention paid to the methods of social history that Bruce C. Nelson utilized to illuminate our understanding of Chicago’s anarchists in *Beyond the Martyrs* in 1988. Thus we learn very little about the occupations of the anarchists or their involvement in the labour movement; nor do we learn much about actual people apart from well-known figures such as Johann Most and Emma Goldman. While the author states explicitly that political and theoretical exegesis is not his project, presumably what makes an anarchist meeting different from a Rotary meeting is the anarchism, and we learn very little about the politics of the German anarchists here. Brief overviews sketch some of the highlights, such as Most’s background and Haymarket, but the treatment of complicated political events and ideologies sometimes leads to overstatement.

It does seem a disservice to these activists, for example, to conclude that the public’s hostility to anarchism was based on its mistaken assumption that anarchism meant “lawlessness and anti-institutionalism.” Did the movement pose no real threat to mainstream ideas and values? It is also misleading to insist there has been “no anarchist-inspired act of deliberate violence...committed by a self-identified anarchist in the United States.” (4) However quickly anarchists disassociated themselves from Leon Czolgosz after he assassinated President McKinley in 1901, he did claim to be inspired by anarchism. The 1916 Preparedness Day bombing in San Francisco was almost certainly the work of anarchists or anarcho-syndicalists, and Paul Avrich has suggested that an anarchist hurled the Haymarket bomb and that Sacco was guilty of murder even if Vanzetti was innocent. Mario Buda was an anarchist when he packed dynamite into a wagon and set it off on Wall Street, killing 40 people in 1920 to protest the arrests of Sacco and Vanzetti.

Focusing on the quotidian leads the author to conclude that German anarchists “simply lived by their beliefs as much as possible,” (222) and so when the First World War made German identity a liability rather than an asset, the movement collapsed without a trace. This may be so, but one wonders if more attention to the politics would have revealed a greater legacy. It seems unlikely that the German anarchists had no impact on the next generations of syndicalists and anarchists who exerted some influence in the labour and left movements, and that impact would be found in politics rather than culture. Nonetheless, Goyens gives us a stimulating glimpse of a vibrant oppositional movement that was as rooted in ethnicity and personality as it was in ideology and polemic, and he is surely right to insist that we need to study its culture and life.

Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism, puts politics at the centre of anarchism, and in doing so, stakes out a provocative and important thesis. Many historians, including George Woodcock and Peter Marshall, trace anarchist thought back to antiquity. As Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt argue, creating such a pedigree requires lumping together thinkers from Lao-tze to William Godwin to Leo Tolstoy to anonymous Wobblies to “libertarian” capitalists, all of whom may have been anti-state but have little else in common. Such a “tradition,” the authors note, is no tradition at all. It obscures the very real differences between such disparate thinkers; it is ahistorical; and it reinforces the notion that anarchism is essentially an extreme but liberal critique of the state. Instead, *Black Flame* argues that it is historically more accurate and politically more useful to see anarchism as a reaction to capitalism. It is an ideology that dates from about the mid-nineteenth century, and is fundamentally opposed to capitalist relations; as the authors define them, all anarchists are socialists, but not all socialists are anarchists.

This insistence on the political and analytical importance of class struggle is welcome, and means this will be a difficult book for the contemporary movement of “post-anarchism.” This turn, represented by authors such as Todd May and Saul Newman, looks to Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, and Lacan for inspiration and harkens back to Max Stirner and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon to characterize anarchism, approvingly, as a philosophical position based on idealism and individualism. Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, however, insist Stirner and Proudhon should not be categorized as anarchists. Acknowledging that these philosophers provided useful ideas and critiques, Schmidt and van der Walt make clear that they did not have a radical critique of capitalism and so, however valuable their contributions, they cannot be considered part of the anarchist movement. Instead, they argue that the first theorist of anarchism was Bakunin, followed by Kropotkin. At the same time, the authors reject the notion that anarchism is largely an intellectual movement that descended from great thinkers. They are more interested in anarchist organizations and the anarchist influence on labour and peasant movements, and turn their attention to a broader tradition of people and movements that includes syndicalists, the Ukrainian insurgents during the Russian Revolution, Spanish anarchists, Chinese peasants, and many others. In particular, this volume, largely based on secondary sources, outlines the political themes and issues that have united and divided anarchists since the split with Marx in the First International, with detailed attention to the arguments within anarchism over violence, racism, sexism, reform, mass insurrection, syndicalism, and organization.

The contribution of this book is three-fold: it offers a much-needed corrective to the liberal “lifestyle” and “philosophical” trends that have attached themselves to anarchism; it demonstrates and contributes to the diversity,

themes, and arguments within anarchism; and it draws our attention to movements that have, like Goyens's German anarchists in New York, too often been ignored, often for political rather than historical reasons. In lively yet carefully crafted prose, the authors have provided an excellent analysis of anarchism rooted in class struggle, and a proposed second volume will examine the influence of anarchism around the world. The depth and breadth of the research are impressive, the arguments sophisticated, and the call to organize timely.

If there is a potential misstep here, it is in the analysis of Marx. Schmidt and van der Welt acknowledge the crucial contribution Marx's analysis of capitalism made to anarchist thought, especially in delivering it from the idealism that characterized Proudhon's thought. They are careful to delineate Marx from various Marxists, and point out that too often Marx's critics, including those in the anarchist movement, have attacked not Marx but a caricature of him. At times, however, their take on Marx seems to come from a reading of some of his less temperate pronouncements that imply a teleological understanding of history. While they are correct to attack that rigid teleology, it is not so clear how accurate it is to label Marx that way. But this is a relatively small criticism of a book that is impressive in its sweep, its detailed research, its innovative ideas, and its sustained polemic. It may not budge the post-anarchists, but it does suggest why they have had little impact outside the graduate seminar.

Paul McLaughlin approaches the history of anarchism from a very different direction. Where the authors of *Black Flame* root anarchism in mass movements and class struggle, McLaughlin examines it as a political philosophy centred on moral and ethical questions of authority and duty. Defining anarchism as "scepticism towards authority," (29) McLaughlin asks: who has the right to command? On what grounds? He is careful to argue that this scepticism is not restricted to the state and that it is not a blind rejection of all authority. But he insists that those who wish to be obeyed must offer valid reasons before expecting anyone to acknowledge their authority.

McLaughlin then goes through twenty common justifications recognizing the authority of the state, ranging from arguments from nature to contract theory, and demolishes each with clear and cogent arguments to conclude that "the state is without moral foundation." (97) Since the state's apologists from Plato to Locke to Rawls have failed to meet the burden of proof, McLaughlin concludes, it should not be recognized. We may be forced to obey, but we have no moral obligation or duty to obey. Having established the moral principle for anarchism, he traces a coherent, if diverse, lineage in philosophical thought, stemming from the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and Left Hegelianism. McLaughlin then identifies three formative texts for anarchist thought: Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), Proudhon's *What is Property?* (1840), and Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* (1844). Clearly the authors of *Black Flame* take issue with this pedigree, but from the perspective of political philosophy, McLaughlin gives crisp and valuable synopses of these

works to draw out the theoretical foundations that presaged anarchism as an intellectual current. He then takes up the works of Bakunin, Kropotkin, and a number of less-known figures, such as Errico Malatesta and Rudolf Rocker, and contemporary anarchists such as Noam Chomsky and Murray Bookchin, to demonstrate how anarchist thought has evolved. With the authors of *Black Flame*, McLaughlin has little use for the post-anarchism that has, in his opinion, jettisoned the Enlightenment tradition much too quickly and has little left on which to base either an anarchist ethic or revolutionary agency. More generally, he suggests that the insights of post-modernism offer nothing new to anarchism save “the scholastic verbiage of a fashionable philosophy” and, in contrast to the clarity of most anarchist writers, an “impenetrable professional discourse.” (167) It is difficult to argue with this conclusion.

It is perhaps easier to argue with McLaughlin’s interpretation of Marx. Characterizing historical materialism as a “‘science’ of dogmatically limited scope,” (139), he contrasts it with an anarchism that is “an ethical position with no scientific pretensions” that has “no obligation to recognize economic factors as ultimate determinants in each and every instance.” (139) This is a traditional anarchist critique of Marx, but it has rarely engaged Marx at a sophisticated level. More commonly it is usually content to cite some of Marx’s more polemical and intemperate overstatements on history, technology, and “economics,” rather than his historical analyses and refinements where he demonstrates a much more subtle and interesting view of history. Nor do these arguments usually pay any attention to the profound arguments within Marxism over the “base” and the “superstructure.” E.P. Thompson, for example, would not recognize, or accept, much of the Marx McLaughlin holds up, and Ellen Meiksins Wood has noted that the base-superstructure metaphor has long been more trouble than it is worth. The debate over the nature and role of the state re-emerged in the 1960s, and has moved far from the crude economic determinism attributed to Marxism by anarchists. It is a mistake to hold all Marxists, and Marx himself, to a simple, deeply contested reading of historical materialism.

McLaughlin, however, is more sophisticated than most anarchist critics of Marx. Nor does he make the error of many anarchists, which is to deny economic explanations and exploitation altogether. Indeed, he excoriates the contemporary “Post-Left” for its refusal to engage in a systemic and systematic critique of liberalism and capitalism, and concludes that an opposition that has only “a vague intuition of social injustice...offers nothing but a road to nowhere.” (180) Critical of “lifestyle anarchism” and Post-Left apathy, McLaughlin lauds the Old Left for its critical understanding of capitalism and the New Left for its cultural critique of other forms of power. His conclusion is that social anarchism, that is, left-wing anarchism, offers a coherent, non-millenarian guide to social change and meaningful politics.

The three books approach the study of anarchism from very different directions, from philosophy to mass movements to daily life, and there is some

considerable disagreement over the meaning and history of anarchism. Together, however, they demonstrate that anarchism is not a simplistic, chiliastic movement; it has been an important political, cultural, and philosophical force that has evolved over time. The books also share the insistence that the study of the past should be undertaken with an eye to activism in the present. While none draws simple, direct lessons from the past – no one suggests we should ask “what would Kropotkin do?” – each insists on the relevance of anarchism’s dynamic critique of capital, the state, and authority to build a better world. That the authors disagree, sometimes rather forcefully, with how the past should be studied, is not a vitiating contradiction but an indication of the richness of anarchist history, contemporary thought, and historiography.