

The Two Main Trends in Anarchism

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Alternate Tendencies of Anarchism

Uri Gordon (2008). *Anarchy Alive!*

Michael Schmidt & Lucien van der Walt (2009). *Black Flame*.

It has been stated by various theorists that there are two main trends in modern anarchism. How they are conceptualized varies with the writer. I will state how I see the two broad tendencies in the anarchist movement, using the above two books to illustrate the two trends (this is particularly not a review of *Black Flame*). I will describe them as differing on the issues of revolution or reformism, of democracy, of what “prefigurative politics” mean, and of attitudes toward the working class.

Near the beginning of a recent book on anarchism by Uri Gordon (2008), an Israeli anarchist, the author discusses the “*most prominent division*” among anarchists. He starts with the way this was framed by David Graeber (2002) of the U.S. as between “*a minority tendency of ‘sectarian’ or ‘capital-A anarchist groups,’*” which have developed, dogmatic, political programs, and “*a majority tendency of ‘small-a anarchists’...who ‘are the real locus of historical dynamism right now’*” and who are much looser programmatically (Gordon 2008; p.23–24; for my views on Graeber’s anarchism, see Price 2007). The only group Graeber referred to as sectarian, dogmatic, big-A, anarchist, was the Northeastern Federation of Anarchist-Communists (I am a member of NEFAC, but not an official spokesperson).

Gordon thinks there is “something” to Graeber’s distinction, but that it should be more “subtly” interpreted. First of all, “*capital-A groups are hardly a minority tendency ...[having] many thousands of members*” (p. 24). This is especially true if we include the memberships of the anarchist-syndicalist unions in Europe and elsewhere. Contrary to charges of “sectarianism” and “dogmatism,” Gordon notes that most “platformists” do not regard Makhno’s Organizational Platform of 1926 as a sacred text but treat it as a beginning for discussion. (Often, calling someone “dogmatic” is a writer’s way of saying that someone disagrees with the writer and is stubbornly refusing to accept the writer’s opinion.)

Instead, Gordon sees the distinction between the two tendencies as over “political culture” (this is a non-ideological way of discussing differences). One trend (the capital-A anarchists) identifies with “*the traditional political culture of the anarchist movement established before the Second World War*” (p.25). He says that they have formal structures with elected officials, and that decisions are often made through votes. They emphasize workplace organizing, anti-war actions, and publishing their ideas. The other (small-a) trend does not care much about anarchist traditions, has only informal groups, makes decisions by consensus, and, he writes, focuses on ecology, identity politics, experimental community, and Eastern spirituality.

“*The difference between the two anarchisms is generational — an ‘Old School’ and a ‘New School’*” (same). Without wanting to denounce the Old School anarchists, Gordon (like Graeber) is plainly on the side of the New School of anarchism. (He is not always so nonsectarian; later in his book, he angrily denounces my views on Israel/ Palestine — which is not directly related to my topic here; see pp. 149 — 151; responded to in Price 2009).

While I think that Gordon has accurately distinguished the two main trends in current anarchism, I do not think that Old versus New is a useful way to understand the division. Many of the so-called New School views he cites can be found way back in anarchist history, starting with Proudhon and Stirner and others. Gordon specifically cites Gustav Landauer’s concepts from

1911, to illustrate his own views. Many of these ideas were raised by Paul Goodman and Colin Ward, among other anarchists, in the 60s and 70s. Few of the New School's ideas are all that new.

The Broad Anarchist Tradition

However the distinction as such is valid. What Gordon calls the Old School and Graeber calls capital-A anarchism is called “the broad anarchist tradition” by Schmidt & van der Walt (2009) of the Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front in South Africa. This is the tradition of anarchism from Michael Bakunin to Peter Kropotkin to Emma Goldman to Nestor Makhno, including those who called themselves anarchist-communists and anarchist-syndicalists. Most people who called themselves anarchists historically were in this tradition.

Almost the only thing in Black Flame with which I disagree is that it regards anyone outside the broad anarchist tradition as not being “anarchist,” although they may be “libertarian.” “*Class struggle' anarchism, sometimes called revolutionary or communist anarchism, is not a TYPE of anarchism; in our view, it is the ONLY anarchism*” (Schmidt & van der Walt 2009; p. 19). Since Proudhon was neither for class struggle, nor revolution, nor communism, even he does not make the cut; he only “influenced” anarchism, similar to Marx. This approach is pointless. There are, and have been, a great many people who call themselves “anarchists” who do not fit in the mainstream of anarchism. However they are anti-statist and anticapitalist, while often regarding themselves as “revolutionaries.” It is indeed worth pointing out that they are not part of the main tradition, but is it useful to argue about whether or not they are really “anarchists?” That does make us look like sectarians and dogmatists. We should argue about the content of their beliefs (that they are mistaken in their politics) rather than their label.

As noted, Gordon does not deny that his so-called New School does not follow “*the traditional political culture of the anarchist movement.*” He just does not care, and may even find this a virtue.

Political Differences between the Two Trends: On Revolution

To get to the real differences between the two trends of anarchism, it is necessary to look at the serious political differences between them — not at an nonideological “culture,” but at actual politics.

The broad anarchist tradition (class struggle anarchist-communism or Old School anarchism or whatever) has always been revolutionary. That is, its members have believed that the ruling class is extremely unlikely to give up power without resistance, a resistance which will center on its state. A vast movement of the oppressed and exploited must rise up and smash the state and dismantle the capitalist economy and all other forms of oppression. These must be replaced by new forms of popular self-organization and self-management. This does not contradict the struggle for present-day reforms and improvements, but sets a strategic end-goal.

Gordon is typical of the New School anarchists (or whatever) in that he rejects such a revolutionary approach. Traditional anarchists, he writes, used to argue about a how to organize society after a revolution. “*Today, in contrast, anarchist discourse lacks both the expectation of eventual revolutionary closure...*” or interest in visions of a post-revolutionary society (Gordon 2008; p. 40). Further, “*anarchists today do not tend to think of revolution — if they even use the term — as a future event but rather as a present-day process...*” (p. 41). Instead of changing all society,

which may or may not be possible, he writes, anarchists should promote “anarchy as culture” which may include large events but also “*fleeting moments of nonconformism and carefree egalitarianism*” (same). Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zones are cited, which, he says, might include a “quilting bee” or “dinner party”.

Not that nonconformism and dinner parties are bad; quite the contrary. But they are not a strategy for popularly overturning the capitalist state. Nor does Gordon worry about this. “*The development of non-heirarchical structures...is, for most anarchists, an end in itself*” (p. 35). Gordon never says right out loud that his tendency has given up on revolution, but I cannot read this any other way.

To sound radical, Gordon and other anarchists insist that it is un-anarchist to make demands on the state, to try to win benefits by threatening the state or the capitalist class. “...A ‘*politics of demand*’...*extends undue recognition and legitimation to state power...a strategy far removed from anarchism*” (p. 151). Instead, anarchists are supposed to create a better world by directly acting differently toward each other.

But anarchists have always made demands on the state, such as to stop waging specific wars or to release prisoners or to provide social benefits. It is one way to demonstrate to nonanarchists that the state cannot be relied on but must be threatened to win gains. And we have made demands on capitalists, as in fighting for union recognition or better working conditions. Refusing to make demands on the state or on the capitalists may sound very radical (as if they care whether anarchists give them “recognition and legitimation”!) but it is a reformist cop-out, an abdication of the struggle.

Gordon emphasizes “prefigurative politics.” Both “schools” of anarchism would agree on the importance of building non-heirarchical institutions in the here-and-now. But to Gordon and his tendency what matters is the interpersonal dynamics of informal networks of anarchists, whether or not they are effective for further purposes.

For the broad anarchist tradition, what matters is building a democratic, popular, counter-culture of resistance. Referring to “*rent strikes and community organizing*,” Schmidt & van der Walt (2009) say, “*as part of the project of building counterpower, mass anarchists built dense and overlapping networks of popular, associational life. These included theater troupes, neighborhood committees, workers’ night-schools, and even popular ...*” (p. 181).

Gordon does not accept this conception, partly because he does not believe in democracy, even the most radical, participatory, version of direct democracy. Few anarchists of his trend are as outspoken in rejecting democracy. (Graeber [2002], for example, is for democracy, which he identifies with consensus.) “*Anarchism...represents not the most radical form of democracy...*” but something else (p. 70). By this Gordon first seems to mean consensus, but soon explains that he means leadership by a hidden elite when organizing the movement. “*Anarchists are bound to acknowledge that this invisible, subterranean, indeed unaccountable use of power is not only inevitable...but also needs to be embraced, since it coheres with their worldview in important respects*” (p.75). This is consistent with the worst, most undemocratic aspects of Proudhon’s and Bakunin’s thought, which most of anarchism had long abandoned.

In contrast, the view of revolutionary class struggle anarchists is, “*anarchism would be nothing less than the most complete realization of democracy — democracy in the fields, factories, and neighborhoods, coordinated through federal structures and councils from below upward...*” (Schmidt & van der Walt 2009; p. 70). It tends to regard use of consensus or voting as a practical issue, not a matter of principle.

Political Differences: On Class

To the broad anarchist tradition, the center of its politics is class based: supporting and rooting itself in the working class and also in the peasantry. This has also included support for nonclass based struggles around gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, war, and ecology — all issues which overlap with and interact with class. But it has seen the working class as having a particular power, at least potentially, for stopping the machinery of the system and for starting it up differently. (An excellent defense of a working class perspective may be found in Meiksins Wood 1998.) For this reason, the broad anarchist tradition of class struggle anarchism overlaps with libertarian interpretations of Marx.

At no point does Gordon make a class analysis of the anarchist trend he is describing, nor of any other topic. As he described the movement, “animal liberation,” among other issues, is “*as prominent as workers’ struggles. In the latter area, the industrial sector and traditional syndicalism are being replaced by McJobs and self-organized unions of precarious workers*” (p. 5). This bit of ignorance is almost all his version of anarchism has to offer millions of working people around the globe.

Bookchin and Other Differences

Some readers may wonder how my conception of the two trends of anarchism relates to the distinction made by Murray Bookchin (1995) between “social anarchism” and “lifestyle anarchism.” Leaving aside Bookchin’s vitriolic style of argument, there are some similarities. Bookchin’s social anarchism is also rooted in anarchist communism and is also for radical democracy. Many of his criticisms of what he calls lifestyle anarchism are appropriate for what Gordon calls New School anarchism.

But there are problems. It would be unfair to summarize Gordon’s views as merely “lifestylism.” He, like others, believes in being part of popular movements against capital and the state. He begins his book with his participation in the 2005 anti-G5 demonstrations. Bookchin, on the other hand, shared all too many of the views of the reformist anarchists. “*Bookchin...sought to erect a new ‘anarchist’ strategy — freed of class struggle and hostile to the organized working class...*” (Schmidt & van der Walt 2009; p. 79). He his strategy (“libertarian municipalism”) was based on getting elected to local governments. This is even more reformist than that of the “little a-anarchists.” Eventually, Bookchin stopped calling himself an anarchist.

There is, then, one trend, of revolutionary anarchism, which builds on the broad historical anarchist movement, which is revolutionary in its methods and its goals, which is radically democratic in its means and its prefigured ends, which is centered in the working class but which also supports every other struggle against oppression, and which aims for a libertarian socialist (communist) society.

By contrast, Gordon supports a large trend in modern anarchism which I would call “reformist anarchism,” since it is nonrevolutionary in its methods and strategy (however much it might like to eventually, somehow, see a new society). It does not build on the major insights of traditional anarchism. It is often undemocratic, in theory at least. It downplays class issues or ignores them in practice. It is overtly anticapitalist and presumably socialist or communist, but, without a strategy for revolution to create such a society, this does not mean much in practice.

There are other issues between the two trends as well as within each trend, which I have not covered. Gordon, for example, is sympathetic to anarchist-primitivism and to anarchist-pacifism, but does not fully agree with either one. And, as Schmidt & van der Walt point out, the broad anarchist tradition includes a split between insurrectional anarchists and mass struggle anarchists (see chapter 3), as well as among people with all sorts of views on whether anarchists should organize separately (chapter 8 on “platformism”), whether to join unions (chapters 6 and 7), whether to defend oppressed nations’ self-determination (chapter 10), etc. This is why it is called the BROAD anarchist tradition! But the basic ideas are clear.

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