

Black Flame A Commentary

Robert Graham*

In their critique of the so-called “seven sages” approach to anarchism in *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism, Counter-Power, Volume 1* (2009), Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt claim that there “is only one anarchist tradition, and it is rooted in the work of Bakunin and the Alliance” of Socialist Democracy (71). This is the tradition of “class struggle” anarchism, which for Schmidt and van der Walt is not merely “a type of anarchism; in our view, it is the *only* anarchism” (19). This is an extraordinary claim

* Robert Graham is the editor of the three-volume anthology of anarchist writings from ancient China to the present day, *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas*. He has published many essays on the intellectual history of anarchism and contemporary anarchist theory, including the Introduction to the Pluto Press edition of Proudhon’s *General Idea of the Revolution in the 19th Century*, ‘The Role of Contract in Anarchist Ideology,’ ‘From the Bottom Up: The First International and the Origins of the Anarchist Movement,’ ‘Noam Chomsky’s Contributions to Anarchism,’ ‘Communism and Anarchism: The Great Debate Between Two Bastions of the Left,’ ‘Reinventing Hierarchy: The Political Theory of Social Ecology,’ and many other reviews and articles.

based upon a historicist definition of anarchism that excludes even Proudhon, the originator of the doctrine and the first self-proclaimed anarchist, from “the broad anarchist tradition,” by which Schmidt and van der Walt really mean the more narrow tradition of class struggle anarchism (18). According to this approach, the “broad anarchist tradition” is really nothing more than a form of socialism, one that is libertarian and revolutionary (6). Anarchism, as a distinct doctrine, disappears, subsumed under the socialist rubric.

That there are different schools of anarchist thought does not mean that only one of them qualifies as “anarchist,” no more than the fact that there are many different schools of socialist thought means that only one of them qualifies as “socialist,” although the Marxists used to think so. Schmidt and van der Walt argue that their narrow definition of anarchism makes anarchism a coherent doctrine because differing conceptions of anarchism with contrary ideas are now excluded from the very definition of anarchism. But if anarchism is just a form of socialism, and there are differing conceptions of socialism, then any definition of socialism that encompasses these competing and sometimes contradictory conceptions of socialism is similarly deficient. If the demands of coherence mean that only one body of thought can qualify as anarchist, then it must also be true that only one body of thought can qualify as socialist. But Schmidt and van der Walt accept that there are competing and contrary conceptions of socialism, including anarchism and Marxism. If both anarchism and Marxism can be considered forms of socialism, despite their many differences, then there is no reason why there cannot be different forms of anarchism. On the contrary, if Marxism is understood as an internally coherent theory of one kind of socialism, and contrary conceptions of socialism, such as “class struggle” anarchism, are also defined as “socialist,” different conceptions of anarchism are also possible. Even though they may be contrary to each other to greater and lesser degrees, they still remain “anarchist.”

Schmidt and van der Walt then conflate anarchism with self-described anarchist movements, so that anarchism cannot but be the ideas expressed and embodied by these movements, all of which, they claim, trace their lineage back to Bakunin and the First International (44–46). Anyone who cannot trace his or her ideological roots back to this family tree does not qualify as an “anarchist.” This is a completely circular argument and a problematic way to approach the study of anarchist ideas and movements.

If anarchism is whatever Bakunin and his associates said it was, then of course Bakunin and his associates qualify as anarchists. But if other people develop conceptions of anarchism contrary to that of Bakunin and the Alliance, then they don’t qualify as anarchists, even if they did so around the same time as Bakunin, or even before him, as in the case of Proudhon (83–85). Gustav Landauer, whose communitarian anarchism was heavily influenced by Proudhon and Tolstoy, both of whom Schmidt and van der Walt exclude from the anarchist canon, cannot be considered an anarchist because he was not a Bakuninist. On their account anarchism must be constrained within a narrow body of thought, from which no significant departures or modifications can be made without risking one’s “anarchist” status. This is like attempts to maintain a Marxist “orthodoxy,” and similarly threatens to inhibit any significant innovation because anarchism must remain within the general confines of its “original” formulation. The argument echoes a similar idea within Marxism, and it threatens to inhibit any significant innovation because anarchism must remain within the general confines of its “original” formulation. This turns anarchism from a living tradition into an historical relic.

While Schmidt and van der Walt exclude Proudhon from the “broad” anarchist tradition, Bakunin and Kropotkin certainly did not do so. Bakunin praised Proudhon for “boldly [declaring] himself an anarchist,” and described his own revolutionary anarchism as “Proudhonism widely developed and pushed right to these, its final consequences” (Bakunin, 1974: 100 & 198).

Kropotkin similarly observed that Proudhon “boldly proclaimed Anarchism and the abolition of the State” (Woodcock 1995: 56).

There are other ways of defining anarchism, ways that recognize the possibility of different “anarchisms” and which allow anarchism to be conceived as a truly “broad” tradition of thought comprising different schools, currents, and tendencies. This was something that Kropotkin acknowledged, having participated in the formulation and refinement of anarchist views: the movement away from Proudhon’s mutualism and Bakunin’s collectivism to anarchist communism, the debates between the insurrectionists and the syndicalists, the disagreements over direct action and propaganda by the deed, the role of technology and the nature of post-revolutionary society. Later anarchists, such as Landauer, were aware of these debates and participated in some of their own, developing new ideas and approaches, incorporating elements from the anarchists who preceded them, often in a very conscious manner, but also departing from them in significant respects. For them, anarchism was a broad and *living* tradition, always subject to change, not restricted to the general form initially developed in the particular historical circumstances of the First International.

REFERENCES

- Bakunin, M. 1974. *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, ed. A. Lehning. New York: Grove Press.
- Schmidt, M. and L. van der Walt. 2009. *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism, Counter-Power, Volume 1*. Oakland: AK Press.
- Woodcock, G., ed. 1995. *Peter Kropotkin: Evolution and Environment*. Montreal: Black Rose Books.