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Anarchism and Leninist Communism: 1917 and all that

Carl Levy

One of the most notable friend-enemies of anarchism, Eric Hobsbawm, affords us a useful perspective from which to assess the legacy of the October Revolution and in turn the surprising revival worldwide of anarchism or anarchist-type movements since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The final instalment of his four-volume history of the modern and contemporary world, *The Age of Extremes*, ends on a rather sober note with the collapse of the legatee of the October Revolution: the senior Marxist historian only perked up in the years before his death as he noted the rise of a new alternative globalisation movement, which seemed to transcend the narrow strictures of the Blairite Third Way, although it is worthwhile recalling that Hobsbawm was godfather to the New Labour project in the 1980s. Hobsbawm was a harsh critic of anarchism and indeed a harsh critic of revivals of non-orthodox Marxist forms of socialism associated with the New Left in the 1960s. However, he was also attracted to the spirit and imagination of the anarchists, the populist radical socialists of Latin America, the more sober but daringly revisionist Italian Eurocommunists and a longer history of unorthodox Italian communism rightly or wrongly associated with Antonio Gramsci. From his earliest published work, *Primitive Rebels* (1959), using (but not declaring) the Gramscian concepts of common sense and good sense, Hobsbawm assessed the vigour and usefulness of the unrefined radicalisms of the ‘primitive rebels’ of Spain and Italy and later, perhaps in the light of the unpredicted convulsions of 1968, the syndicalism of the *Belle Époque*. The ‘pre-political’ radicalism of the primitive rebels and from his vantage point, the muddled but inventive radicalism of pre-1914 syndicalism, were recognised as significant rivals to anti-reformist Marxism in the era of Second International orthodoxy.¹

In studying the primitive rebels Hobsbawm employed a sympathetic ethnographic methodology: he was not a participant observer, nor would he have endorsed the militant co-research of Italian autonomist intellectuals or for that matter the later work of David Graeber in the global justice movement or Occupy. Nevertheless the primitive rebels or later the syndicalists were not dismissed as pathological cases, as Noam Chomsky noted

in the works of the Cold War liberal historians of Spanish anarchism. Hobsbawm was an historian not a full-fledged party professional. Unlike Lenin, who in tactics and alliances wooed all sorts of primitive rebels and their syndicalist cousins in the lead-up to and aftermath of October but considered them unscientific fools, Hobsbawm had the anthropological imagination to allow them to speak for themselves and not dismiss them out of hand, allowing them some say in their own terms, although in the 'last instance', never abandoning the severe judgement of Marxist law. In that respect Hobsbawm work was a curious mixture of Carlo Ginzburg's sympathetic recreation of life-worlds which had not entered to the halls of 'scientific socialism', while, like Gramsci, in the end, he reaffirmed Marxist and Leninist verities.²

Thus, curiously, in this sense Hobsbawm's recognition of the importance of anarchism and syndicalism in the pre-1914 period anticipated the recent yoking of the study of anarchism and syndicalism and the first era of modern globalisation (1880-1914) by anarchist and anarchist-friendly academics. Perhaps the later work of Benedict Anderson ties together the unlikely pairing of Hobsbawm with the regular contributors to *Anarchist Studies* and by now a vast catalogue of monographs inspired by anarchism or an anarchist methodology. Nevertheless, by 2017, it is has become old hat to compare the radical syndicates and soviets of circa 1905 with a contemporary parallel spread of 'Horizontal', 'Square' and 'Occupy' formations in reaction to the crises of the model of Neo-Liberalism since 2008.³

My work on the anarchists and syndicalists has been influenced by the chronology which Hobsbawm seemed to accept in the latter part of his life. The widespread acceptance of anarchism and syndicalism globally and the wider usage of small 'a' 'anarchist methods', was more likely in eras (pre-1914 and post 1989) when the vanguard party form of revolutionary radicalism was overshadowed by other forms of non-social democratic radicalism. Although recent research on anarchism and syndicalism has demonstrated that in the 1920s and 1930s, both forms of libertarian socialism were perhaps healthier outside the so-called exception of the 'Spanish case' than has been previously thought – especially in the Global South – the general trend has not been disproven. The healthiness of the Marxist-Leninist party model was also present in the heterodox 1960s and 1970s. The model of the heroic anti-imperialist Third World Revolutionary, or a grotesque 'libertarian' reading of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (which, for example, in France combined the post-modernist thoughts of Foucault and friends, an untheorized form of libertarianism, with the

vanguard party), undermined the anarchist, rank and file and Situationist currents that were certainly present in May 1968. In another case, the American SDS, the largest radical youth movement ever to exist in the USA, was destroyed by ever more sectarian leadership group who openly ditched the libertarian and IWW-like tradition of participatory democracy for ever more extreme and sectarian forms of Leninism. The same process happened in the African American civil rights and liberation struggles with the near anarchist-like model of SNCC being replaced by the militarised, heroic guerrillas of the self-styled Third World Leninists of the Black Panthers. Just as the more intelligent members of the Establishment realised by 1920 that the rise of the Russian-centric and hierarchical Comintern had undermined the unity of the Left (indeed the revolutionary Left) and thus presaged the end of the surge of revolt which gathered steam in a war-weary world from 1916, so too did the American FBI realise that adolescent 'Castros' and 'Lenins' would undermine the far more serious threat of a united or at least functional SDS. Thus recent archival research has shown that FBI undercover agents were ordered to support the psychedelic Stalinists of the Weather faction of SDS, because they seemed the most likely candidate to disrupt and discredit the national institution. Like many such efforts, the blowback from this was immense (leading eventually to Watergate). In any case, most factions at the convention in 1969 where the FBI agents were present, engaged in a Marxist-Leninist arms race. They forsook the libertarian political culture which had allowed this chaotic but lively organisation to grow rapidly.⁴

If anarchist-like influences and formations were present after 1968 in the New Social Movements of the 1970s and 1980s and indeed in the early days of the Green political parties, the legacy of 1917 was still alive. The attempts at Eurocommunism and recuperation of the spirit of 1968 in the new French Socialist Party, undermined the space for autonomous space for free-standing libertarian movements. Certainly the lion's share of terrorist organisations which spun out of 1968 embraced the heroic anti-imperialism of Third World Marxist-Leninism with gusto, essentially engaging in variations on the theme of Régis Debray's misleading reading of the Castroite revolution. Although perhaps this reading had similarities with the nineteenth-century Anarchist concept of the propaganda of the deed, the underlying theory and ideology relied upon Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the political economy and geo-politics of the world, which in turn relied upon some suitable model or patron in the 'Socialist World'. Perhaps the syndicalist-like rank and file factory-based movements in Italy from 1969 to the early 1980s are the closest small 'a' anarchism came

to New Left political formations. In this case the Autonomous Marxist tradition and *operaismo* were forerunners to the present-day fashionable concepts of the 'socialised worker', 'immaterial work' and the society of 'non-work' or precarious labour. But just as during the period of classical Marxism, Rosa Luxemburg's concepts of spontaneity and the mass strike, and her criticisms of the authoritarianism of Leninist Democratic Centralism were joined by a rebuke of the anarchist tradition, so too did the Autonomous Marxists differentiate themselves by invoking the logic of Marxism to steer clear of the anarchists. Perhaps more recently anarchists and these strands have found greater common cause with the capacious term 'libertarian socialism' but this an unstable reconciliation.⁵

In any case, with the penetration of varieties of neo-liberalism in the West and the Global South, the downfall of the Soviet Union and the dramatic rise and spectacular economic success of the Leninist capitalist state in China, by the 1990s the position of that political area, which before 1914 was identified with anarchism and syndicalism, had new opportunity structures and political space to emerge as an identifiable player on the global scene. The revival of the anarchist and syndicalist models in this post-1917 world, was a complex story of several strands. On the intellectual side the Global Justice Movement, the networking of social forums, the ensuing financial crisis of 2008 and the Euro crisis and the rise of Square movements, grassroots radicalisms and Left-wing populism in Latin America and then in Europe and North America, became the source of investigation and inspiration for academics: political theorists, economists, and other social scientists. Historians who had been steadily expanding our knowledge of anarchist and syndicalist political and social history since the rise of cohorts of radical historians after '1968', were given validation by what they perceived as a twenty-first century version of the networked and global anti-authoritarian pre and non-Leninist radicalisms that they had traced and brought to life. This corpus of work also became the intellectual framework to interpret the Occupy and Square movements. But if this meant that the date 1917 became less relevant for political and academic discussion, the date 1914 also seemed to be getting a new appraisal. It became evident that Occupy and Square movements had two faces, the Flag and the Mask, as Paolo Gerbaudo has recently put it. Namely, the Mask of cosmopolitan anarchy and the Flag of enraged and hurt patriotism or nationalism. Movements in the Arab and Turkish Springs had wrapped themselves in the national flag from the beginning and it became obvious that the fight in Greece, but also in Spain or the USA, also had strong national-patriotic cadences. This was particularly

the case when political formations such as SYRIZA or Podemos were involved, or feed-off movements whose political imaginations had made their breakthroughs by employing the logic and techniques of small and indeed capital 'A' anarchism. These left-wing populist movements relied on charismatic leaders and the rhetoric of the 'Flag' more than the cosmopolitan 'Mask'. Thus you might say that the question of national particularisms rather than global networks has taken the driver's seat in the past few years, just as the global networks of 1916-1917 were undermined or absorbed by the paradigmatic Leninist network embodied in the Comintern and the rise of aggressively nationalist successor states after the collapse of multi-national empires in 1918.⁶

I have always been fascinated by the networked radicalism of the ante-bellum and First World War. It allowed the near constant Italian exile, Errico Malatesta, to intervene at times of great social crisis in his Italian homeland and give the Italian anarchist movement the ability to punch over its weight in 1898-99, 1914 and 1919-20 when its first powerful iteration in the First International had seemingly been superseded by Marxist-influenced socialism. Similarly, the global network of the First World War, plus the peculiarities of geo-politics and the social and political structures of the weakened Tsarist Empire, allowed the obscure Zurich-bounded Lenin in early 1917 to be transformed into a world figure within a year and then the instigator of a paradigm-shift in world politics, which oriented the global balance of forces until at least the last decade of the twentieth century

I have recently written about this networked wartime radicalism in a discussion of Errico Malatesta's positions during the First World War and in earlier work I demonstrated how the young libertarian-sounding Antonio Gramsci tapped into these networks. We can identify four overlapping networks. The most well-known and studied is that of the anti-war socialists from the parties of the pre-war Second International who attended the gatherings at Zimmerwald and Kienthal, and were then prevented from attending the never-convened congress called by the Petrograd Soviet in 1917 in Stockholm. A second network included the anti-war anarchist and syndicalist militants who opposed the war interventionism of Kropotkin and other luminaries from pre-1914 'classical anarchism', and Malatesta was a central organiser and go-between here. Then there is the related but generationally and psychologically different strand of militant shop stewards and factory council communists, whose form of organisation (the factory councils and the soviet-type organ) was congenial to small 'a' anarchist behaviour and the activities of Anarchists

in Germany, Italy, Russia and elsewhere. Finally, there was the network of revolutionary bohemia and intellectual pacifists, with outposts in New York's Greenwich Village, London's Fitzrovia, Zurich, Barcelona or Munich's Schwabing (the list could go on), and associated with the New York *Liberator* (Max Eastman and friends), the journals of the avant-garde in Paris (Rolland and Barbusse) and elsewhere, and captured in the early vivid novels of the ex-anarchist Victor Serge. The anarchists and ill-defined libertarian mavericks could tap into all four networks and even unorthodox socialists, such as Antonio Gramsci gathered much intellectual sustenance and many news stories for their newspapers from these networks. An alternative history of the rise of the global Leninist paradigm would explain how go-betweens made their peace with Bolshevism or readjusted to forms of social democracy in the 1920s. The biographies of the denizens of these networks embodied the pre-Leninist heterodox rebel movements which emerged from 1914-1917 and also embody the process of sectarian and Bolshevik state sorting of the subsequent era, 1917-1923, in which the Bolsheviks 'asset-stripped' these contradictory if vibrant networks in the process of creating the monopolist imperatives of the Third International.⁷

It has often been argued by anarchists, social scientists interested in elite theory and 'God that Failed' types of many generations, that the anarchist arguments against the Leninist assault on these networks, or indeed and perhaps more controversially, Bakunin's critiques of Marx's politics, anticipated with great clarity the coming of Stalinist totalitarianism and particularly the concept of the New Class. Thus it is asserted that the anarchist battle against the Bolshevik asset-strippers on a global or national level in the period 1918-1923 is reinforced by the previous prophetic warnings of a Jacobin Marxist dictatorship by Bakunin, Kropotkin or others before 1914. These warnings, translated into sociology by Daniel Bell via his acquaintance with the former anarchist Max Nomad became the stuff of the mainstream by the middle of the twentieth century, just as its radical reinterpretation by the critic of Cold War nuclear elites East and West, C. Wright Mills, was stimulated by an interest in the recalled history of the IWW. In the end, however, the crisis of 1917 for the anarchists and libertarian syndicalists or the anarchist-orientated supporters of workers' councils or soviets, was embodied to the degree to which they would abandon their attachment to the core components of their ideology: all forms of anarchism from the classical to the post-modern share a commitment to the autonomy of the individual and a voluntary consensus. So one can argue that anarchism as a social movement in the nineteenth

and twentieth century was in practice a form of libertarian socialism, as on many occasions Malatesta seemed to suggest. Thus anarchists cannot force individuals to be free or use the most surgical forms of violence if they are to be fully-fledged anarchists. Bakunin's arguments about the dictatorship of the proletariat and the quarrels between Bolsheviks and anarchists in 1917 were over the degree of dictatorial violence and the degree of institutionalisation that was permitted. Malatesta never had much time for pacifist anarchists because he was a realist, a realist like the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists in July 1936. Thus in July 1936, when the anarchist militias had comprehensively defeated Franco's forces in the streets of Barcelona, the CNT refused the seals of power handed them by the President of the Catalan region. Instead they formed broad-based anti-fascist committees that were converted into local state power, while some of the more prominent militants joined a national cabinet, and by May 1937, after a brief civil war in the Civil War, had their power greatly reduced and marginalised by the Communists and Socialists. Of course many anarchists argued that they needed to defeat the common enemy before they could embark on the complete social revolution, but in the heat of the moment, with Barcelona at their feet in July 1936, the argument was that anarchists did not take power, they were not Jacobins.⁸

For Malatesta and other activists of his era, who discounted the pacifist anarchists and the proponents of intentional communities (communes or utopian communities), anarchists active in social movements and trade unions were therefore in effect goads and muses: Her Majesty's Disloyal Opposition to the statist social democrats, socialists and even, if allowed, the Bolsheviks. (For a moment in 1919-1920, Makhno and Trotsky discussed the possibility of the Makhnovishchina being permitted an autonomous territory in Russia, but not a departure from the ultimate sovereign power of the Bolshevised state of the soviets. This curiously echoes the current PYG-Rojava experiment in northern Syria where this Kurdish formation have become converts from Leninism to the libertarian municipal confederalism of Murray Bookchin.) Thus in classical and post-1945 anarchism, anarchists embraced the role as goads and provocateurs. In Spain, Russia or Mexico (1910-1920), these anarchists needed allies to carry out their social experiments, so too, after 1945, anarchists and the Situationists were the imagination and subversive agents for a much broader small 'a' anarchism of millions of social actors in 1968. Similarly, as David Graeber noted, in the Occupy and Square movements, the most successful fully paid-up anarchists were those who knew how to disseminate small 'a' anarchism amongst the non-large 'A' occupiers.

Thus, from Malatesta to Graeber, anarchist activists have endorsed a type of pluralism and self-limiting aims, even if their rhetoric at times belies these assertions. But just as in 1917-1923 the anarchists and those who followed small 'a' anarchism had to choose between the dictatorial tendencies of the Bolsheviks and the need to take sides in a civil war with an international dimension, so too more recently the grass-roots and ethnic movements in Latin America and elsewhere have been squeezed by the logic of Left-wing populism and its encounters within the global context. The global networks of 1917 and 2017 have been forced to choose between the Mask and the Flag, this logic has even outlived its original incarnation anchored in Russian-based Bolshevik Leninism, a logic which is of course well recognised in anarchist thought and argument. The recent forward march and apparent tactical defeat/pause of plutocratic populist authoritarianism (Trump, Putin, especially other formations in Europe) have forced the advocates of the Mask to confront the same dilemmas that anarchists confronted in 1939 when antebellum cosmopolitan networks were shattered by world war.⁹

Notes

1. For Eric Hobsbawm see, *The Age of Extremes: the short twentieth century 1914-1991*, London 1994. For an analysis of the centrality of the Soviet Union in his periodisation, see John Breuilly, 'Eric Hobsbawm: nationalism and revolution', *Nations and Nationalism*, 21, 8 (2015), pp630-657. For Hobsbawm's political and intellectual formation see his fascinating autobiography, Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: a twentieth century life*, London 2002. For his connections to Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair, see Herbert Pimlott, 'From "Old Left" to "New Labour"?' Eric Hobsbawm and the Rhetoric of "Realistic Marxism", *Labour/Le Travail*, 56, Fall (2005), pp175-197. For his work on 'primitive rebels', see Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th centuries*, Manchester 1959. For his more positive re-evaluation of syndicalism, see Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries*, London 1994, pp72-73.
2. The best example of Graeber's approach is his ethnographic study of the Global Justice Movement, David Graeber, *Direct Action: an ethnography*, Edinburgh/Oakland 2009. For Chomsky see *American Power and The New Mandarins*, New York 1969. For Carlo Ginzburg, who was very taken by Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels*, see *The Cheese and the Worms: the Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, London 1976. One of the Italian case studies

- in Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* (Davide Lazzaretti) is also approached, using a similar method, by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, see Carl Levy, 'Gramsci's cultural and political sources: anarchism in the prison writings', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 12, 3 (2012), pp44-62.
3. Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Colonial Imagination*, London 2005. For an overview of academic work on anarchism or using anarchist methodologies and their connection to the new globalisation, see Carl Levy, 'Social Histories of Anarchism', *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 4, 2 (2010), pp1-44; Carl Levy, 'Anarchism and Cosmopolitanism', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 16, 3 (2011), pp265-278. For the world of labour and the first era of globalisation, see Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt (eds), *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870-1940: the Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution*, Leiden/Boston 2010.
 4. For the American New Left see Arthur M. Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising. How the Weather Underground Beat the FBI and Lost the Revolution*, New Haven/London 2016. For the participatory and quasi-anarchist element in SNCC and the southern freedom struggle see Francesca Polletta, *Freedom is An Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements*, Chicago 2002. For French Maoism in the 1970s see Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1970s*, Princeton NJ 2010.
 5. Patrick Cuninghame, "'Hot Autumn". Italy's Factory Councils and Autonomous Workers' Assemblies, 1970s', in Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini (eds), *Ours to Master and to Own. Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present*, Chicago, 2011, pp322-337; Alex Prichard, Ruth Kinna, Saul Pinta and David Berry (eds), *Libertarian Socialism. Politics in Black and Red*, Basingstoke 2012.
 6. Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism and Global Protest*, London 2017.
 7. For my recent study of Malatesta during the First World War and his connections to networks outlined above, see 'Malatesta and the war interventionist debate 1914-1917: from the 'Red Week' to the Russian Revolutions', in Matthew S. Adams and Ruth Kinna (eds), *Anarchism 1914-18. Internationalism, Anti-Militarism and War*, Manchester 2017, pp69-94. For my earlier work on Gramsci, see *Gramsci and the Anarchists*, Oxford 1999. For Serge, see *Birth of Our Power*, Oakland 2015 (ed.). For an early but very interesting analysis of Bolshevik 'asset-stripping' see Albert Lindemann, *The 'Red Years': European Socialism versus Bolshevism 1919-1920*, Berkeley CA 1974; and also see Ralph Darlington, *Syndicalism and*

the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis, Farnham 2008; Ness and Azzellini, op. cit., pp84-171.

8. For the relationship between sociology, the New Class and anarchism see, C. Levy (ed.), *Socialism and the Intelligentsia, 1880-1914*, London 1987/2017 and Carl Levy and Saul Newman (eds), *The Anarchist Imagination: Anarchism Encounters and the Humanities and the Social Sciences*, London 2018. Also see, Kenyon Zimmer, 'Premature Anti-Communists? American Anarchism, the Russian Revolution, and Left-Wing Libertarian Anti-Communism, 1917-1939', *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 6, 2 (2009), pp45-71. For the discussion of organisation and anarchism in Malatesta see Davide Turcato, *Making Sense of Anarchism: Errico Malatesta's Experiments with Revolution, 1889-1900*, Basingstoke 2012. For the anarchists in Barcelona in 1936 see A. Guillamón, *Ready for Revolution. The CNT Defense Committees in Barcelona 1933-1938*, Edinburgh 2014.
9. For Graeber's reconstruction of the Occupy Movement and history of direct action in the USA see *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*, London 2014. For the Makhnovshchina see A. Shubin, *Nestor Machno, bandiera nera sull'Ucraina*, Milan 2012. For Rojava see M. Knapp, E. Ayboga and A. Flach, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*, 2016. For the most comprehensive overview of left and right-wing populism see C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P.A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo and P. Ostiguy (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford 2017.