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Tangled Threads of Revolution

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Reflections on the FdCA's "Anarchist Communists: a Question of Class"

Anarchism is not an abstract ideal of freedom springing out of the brain of some intellectual. It is not a dream of utopia unconnected to reality. It is a movement of the exploited workers, beginning in their daily material struggles; and its history is marked by a sustained link between anarchist theory and the continuing struggles of mass working class movements.

This was the perspective of Mikhail Bakunin, the founding theorist of anarchism, whose revolutionary ideas grew out of his experience in the 19th century working class movement of the First International. It was the perspective of the *Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists*, drafted by Nestor Makhno and other Ukrainian and Russian anarchists in response to the defeat of the Russian Revolution by the Bolsheviks. It is the perspective taken by long-standing ZACF militants Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt in their two-volume history of anarchism, *Counter-power*. (The first volume, *Black Flame: the Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, was published by AK Press in February 2009.) And it is the perspective of the ZACF's Italian comrades of the Federazione dei Comunisti Anarchici (Federation of Anarchist Communists, or FdCA), in their excellent theoretical position paper "Anarchist Communists: a Question of Class".

The purpose of the paper is to explain the main principles of the anarchist tradition to which both the FdCA and the ZACF belong, and to locate this tradition within the context of anarchist and revolutionary movements. Ours is a tradition rooted in class struggle: its aim is for the working class to grow from fighting for improvements in the conditions of our daily lives to the point where we can collectively overthrow both capitalism and the state, and establish a society of free equals. In keeping with this, it is a tradition committed to organisation: not authoritarian, hierarchical organisation, like that of the state or of those who wish to take control of the state; but self-managing, federated organisation, where decisions are made from below. So far, these principles are those that have been favoured by the majority in the anarchist movement throughout its history.

What distinguishes our tradition — the tradition of the ZACF and the FdCA — is a commitment to what the paper calls "organisational dualism", also known, following the Latin American anarchists, as "especificismo". We believe that two organisations are needed to build the revolution. One is the mass organisation of the popular classes, which, as the FdCA says, "aims to wring as much as possible out of the bosses in order to win greater wealth for the exploited classes they represent. They try to satisfy the needs of the workers who are being continually

squeezed by their adversary, the bosses.” This organisation can go on to overthrow the bosses, emancipate the workers and establish a free and equal society. Only the workers can free the workers.

But because the mass organisation is built to defend the immediate material needs of all the workers, it cannot be ideologically unified. Very few members of unions and popular social movements today are committed to overthrowing capitalism or the state. Hence another organisation is needed: the political organisation, or specific organisation. This, the FdCA says, is “made up of the members of the mass organisation who share the same theory, the same strategy and similar ideas on tactics. The task of this organisation is, on the one hand, to be the depository for the class memory and, on the other hand, to elaborate a common strategy which can ensure the linking of all the struggles by the class and which can stimulate and guide.” Unlike Marxist-Leninist groups, an anarchist political organisation does not substitute itself for the working class or try to give them orders, and it certainly does not try to seize state power on their behalf. It has no authority within the mass organisation other than rational persuasion of the worth of its ideas by example; its role in it is to “produce analyses, strategies and credible proposals. Its members must gain the trust of the workers and distinguish themselves by the clarity of their ideas and their ability to promote convincing struggles which should, if conditions so permit, be victorious.” And it can warn of the dangers of other tendencies whose ideas and programmes are likely to lead to defeat.

Makhno and his comrades defended the principle of organisational dualism in the *Organisational Platform*. They emphasised several key features of the specific organisation, which have been adopted by the FdCA and the ZACF: notably theoretical unity, tactical unity and collective responsibility. Curiously, there have been anarchist political organisations that do not adhere to these principles — the “organisations of synthesis”, which, in some cases, “accept members who declare themselves to be Anarchists, without any further specification”. As the FdCA makes clear, this leads to an extraordinary mish-mash of ideas. How can the specific organisation “elaborate a common strategy” if its members are pulling in a range of different directions? Theoretical unity, the FdCA notes, “is never complete” — but there must be enough of it to assure a common strategy. Otherwise what is the point of having a specific organisation?

Because of the importance of the *Platform* as a statement of our principles, supporters of a distinct, theoretically and strategically unified specific organisation are often referred to as Platformists. The name is popular as an insult among our opponents, but I, for one, would happily accept it. Nonetheless, we should not make the mistake of thinking that the idea of organisational dualism originated

with the *Platform*: in fact, this work is a restatement of far older anarchist principles. It is a strength of the FdCA's paper that it traces organisational dualism back to Bakunin, and to the clearly stated principles and practices of his specific organisation, the Alliance for Social Democracy, within the First International. The founding theorist of class struggle anarchism was also the founding theorist of our own tendency; and the FdCA paper begins with a brief discussion of his importance, proceeding to two other key theorists, Luigi Fabbri and Camillo Berneri (while recognising the importance of others, such as Makhno and Errico Malatesta, who belonged to or were close to our tradition).

The bright red strand of class struggle

The paper then gives a brief account of three key events in the history of anarchist and working class movements, the Paris Commune of 1871, the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1921 and the Spanish Revolution of 1936–1939. (The FdCA's treatment of Spain raises complex questions, which I cannot engage with here. I believe the authors have not taken sufficient account of the weaknesses of the Spanish anarchist movement. The ZACF will elaborate on this point in a separate commentary.) But the real theoretical meat of the paper begins in the third chapter, which deals with the principles of class struggle. It notes that, while our movement begins not with abstract ideas but with material struggles, a movement that seeks to change the world needs an analysis of its situation. Here we are introduced to the method of historical materialism, with a statement of its principles by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels:

“The first historical action is therefore the creation of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself, and this is precisely a historical action, a fundamental condition of any history, which still today, as millennia ago, must be accomplished every day and every hour simply to keep man [sic] alive [. . .]. In every conception of history therefore, the first point is that this fundamental fact be observed in all its facets and that its place be recognised.”

It is another strength of the paper that it is equally forthright in acknowledging Marx's valuable contributions and in exposing his errors. The FdCA elaborates the point:

Historical materialism is therefore a methodology for the analysis of historical facts which can establish the primary cause for these in the evolution of the productive structure of society, in the development of relationships and

forces of production; every event that history presents us with is therefore not the result of ideas and the clash between different conceptions of life, but the result of the economic interests at stake — direct and indirect manifestations of the relationships which establish themselves with human society in the production of those goods which are necessary for the satisfaction of our historically and socially determined material needs. History is not the history of ideas. Ideas are backdrops created by real movements that can themselves, however, influence the movements. History is the history of the antagonisms created by the production relationships. It is the history of the struggle between the classes.

This gives the background for the introduction of the concept of class; but here I have a small quibble. The FdCA joins the Marxists and “the entire radical left” in defining classes as “the social groups that can be identified on the basis of their position in the cycle of production and the distribution of goods”. But what does this imply? Factory workers are engaged in production; railway workers and dock workers are engaged in transport, which is part of distribution. These are different positions in the cycle. But I have never heard anyone say railway workers and dock workers are a different class from factory workers. Throughout the history of class struggle against capitalism, all these workers have stood side by side against the common enemy, without worrying about different positions in the cycle of production.

This is a small quibble because the real issue becomes clear in the same paragraph. What is fundamental to class is who controls the cycle of production. The capitalists are in control; the workers “own only their ability to work, which they sell to the bosses”. The FdCA notes that anarchists recognise the importance of other classes, such as the peasants, who do not have to sell their labour but are nonetheless exploited and dominated; we believe, contrary to the Marxists, that all such classes have a common interest in overthrowing capitalism and a part to play in the struggle. But power is fundamental. Not that power alone defines class: there are hierarchies that are not class structures, because they are not linked to the means of production and do not allow those at the top to systematically exploit those at the bottom for their material benefit. Classes are not defined by hierarchy alone, nor by “position in the cycle” alone, but by the combination of domination and exploitation. The FdCA clearly understands this; perhaps the problematic sentence merely reflects awkward phrasing or even a failure of translation from the Italian. In any event, the paper makes it clear that exploitation and domination render the dominant and subordinate classes irreconcilable; and in a capitalist system, there is plenty of scope for confrontation between them, which we believe the working class can ultimately win.

Marx's tangles

After some discussion of this confrontation, and of the objectives of the working class — a society of free equals, a communist society, based on the principle “from each according to ability, to each according to need” — the paper turns to a discussion of our differences with other working class movements, and, in particular, a critique of the Marxists. Many of these differences centre on the question of the state; and, as the FdCA points out, the difference reflects a serious failure of Marxist analysis. This point is illustrated with a historical irony:

In 1868, when the Bakuninist International Alliance of Socialist Democracy applied to join the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA), Marx . . . requested a change in its statute: with heavy irony he pointed out that the phrase “equalisation of the classes” was ambiguous and that it would have to be corrected to read “abolition of the classes”. Bakunin agreed that the phrase was improper and agreed with the proposed change which better explained the goal of the revolution. But the error committed by Marx and Engels in 1848 [in the Communist Manifesto] was much greater . . .

What, in fact, can be meant by the proletariat constituting itself “as the dominant class”? First of all, if the proletariat has taken power, then the revolution or the change of hands with the bourgeoisie will already have taken place and as the aim of the revolution is, according to everyone, the abolition of classes . . . the struggle of the proletariat becomes its own dissolution as a class together with all other classes, the bourgeoisie heading the list. In second place, class distinction is not a matter of ethics, somatics or ethnicity, but is based on the different positions which the individual members of a society have with regard to property relationships. At the moment in which individual property is abolished, to be substituted by the collective ownership of production, distribution and consumption, there is an effective end to all class-based social organisation.

Marx knew perfectly well that the revolution aimed at abolishing class. He knew that class was a matter of production relationships: thus, if the working class seizes the means of production, overturning existing production relationships to establish equality, class is thereby abolished. Talking of the proletariat becoming the dominant class is, as the FdCA says, a “non-sense”; but that is just what Marx did in the *Manifesto*, in one of the great statements of his theory and programme.

The FdCA points out that Marxists have defended the need for a workers' state by pointing to the continuing threat of the enemies of the revolution, against

which the workers must defend themselves; and by referring to the need to organise production, which Marxists identify with centralisation. But the paper replies to these points by examining the history of the Russian Revolution. It points out that contrary to Marxist views and practices, Makhno's non-statist popular army was the most successful force in defending the revolution; and that centralised state control of production led to the return of oppression and exploitation, and to the alienation of workers from the revolution. Contrary to Marxist predictions, the "workers' state" did not "wither away when it was no longer needed". Instead, as was "foreseen by Bakunin, [Piotr] Kropotkin, Malatesta, Fabbri and many other libertarian thinkers", the FdCA points out that the state "reproduced the exploitation that it was based on". I might add that this was *capitalist* exploitation: production continued to be for monetary exchange rather than for need, and the Communist Party bureaucrats and bosses accumulated capital through profit, driving continuing expansion of production under their own control, through the exploitation of the workers.

This is an example of the possibility of "superstructure" (in this case, the state) affecting "structure" (the forces and relations of production). As the FdCA points out in an appendix, Marxists tend to maintain that superstructure totally depends on structure: hence, once the relations of exploitation are abolished, the state must wither away. But we say historical materialism does not rule out superstructure feeding back on structure: the state reproduces exploitation, and behind this we can see the authoritarian ideas that promoted the restoration of the state. Again, a vanguard party that sets itself up to represent and direct the exploited masses, aiming to take power on their behalf, will, in one way or another, be separated from the workers and integrated into the structures of the bourgeois state. The struggle, as the FdCA says, must be a social struggle, waged by the workers themselves through direct action in their daily lives, not a political struggle, waged by the representatives of the workers in the authoritarian state structures of the class enemy.

The rigid distinction between structure and superstructure is just one example of Marxists' oversimplistic determinism: there are other, related errors. For instance, Marxists tend to see history as progressing in a predictable way from one economic stage to the next. Communism is to follow capitalism, and cannot be achieved without passing through capitalism; hence, during the rise of capitalism, it is to be seen as progressive, and those who resist it as backward. It is for this reason that Marxists, unlike anarchists and contrary to the evidence of history, tend to write off peasants as potential revolutionaries. Not that they don't have a point. As the FdCA says, we can agree with the Marxists that "the capitalist organisation of labour concentrates large masses of workers into the same physical space, both for production and in daily life, easing the way for political aggregations". But the

paper adds that other factors “have their role to play: the growth in education (not so much regarding schooling, but in the circulation of ideas), which is dragged along by labour once liberated from feudalism; an idea of social justice which emerges from the mists of impatience which have always been produced in every society which is marked by deep inequality; finally, utopia — the embodiment of a less unfair world. The Marxists would say these are superstructural factors (or idealistic, or worse still, petit-bourgeois), but nonetheless of great importance.”

History is not a straightforward matter of the material conditions determining everything else. If you think it is, it can be expected that you will neglect the danger of the “superstructural” state as a force promoting exploitation in its own right. If you think of history as just one stage after another, you may find it easy to regard the overthrow of capitalists by workers as similar to the previous overthrow of aristocrats by capitalists — and one gets the feeling that this is exactly what Marx does, that his idea of the “workers’ state” draws something from the bourgeois takeover of the state and use of it against the aristocracy. By examining the state as a force with some level of independence, we can understand the dangers of the Marxist conception. But it is only fair to point out — as the FdCA does — that some Marxist tendencies (“Luxemburgists, Bordighists, Council Communists, etc”) equally reject the conquest of state power.

Threads of anarchy?

Having taken care of the Marxists, the FdCA turns, in its final chapter, to distinctions within the anarchist movement. It identifies various tendencies: Individualists, Educationists, anti-organisationists (referred to as Anarcho-Communists), Insurrectionists, Anarcho-Syndicalists and our own tendency of Anarchist Communists. (There are also the Libertarian Communists, discussed in an appendix. The FdCA applies this term to a movement that has arisen since the 1960s and has been particularly important in Italy: a movement that is influenced by anarchism but also takes up “elements of Marxist analysis . . . such as the inevitability of the fall of capitalism once it reached its highest stage of development, the automatic nature of the struggles with regard to the economic phase, and a view of the current crisis as being Capital’s final crisis”. However, the paper regards this as a recent development, saying “Libertarian Communism” was “synonymous with ‘Anarchist Communism’ . . . until the 1940s”.)

In considering the meaning of all these strange words, it is worth bearing in mind a question that has caused much confusion in histories of anarchism: What do we mean by the term “anarchist”? Who can be considered an anarchist? The FdCA paper, like most other works on anarchism, fails to tackle this question

directly; this, I will argue, leads to weaknesses in its classification. By contrast, Van der Walt and Schmidt take the question very seriously in *Counter-power*. In seeking a path through the maze of strange words and odd ideas, I will draw extensively on concepts developed in their work.

To begin with, it will not assist us to give the name “anarchist” to whoever chooses to claim it for themselves. Too many people with too many different ideas and practices have seen fit to do so; letting them have their way will not help us to understand whether they actually have anything in common. It is this something in common that we must seek. As a first attempt, we might identify “anarchism” with opposition to the state, or to hierarchical authority in general. But this, I maintain, fails to capture key aspects of the way the word is used. Marxists are not generally identified as anarchists; but Marxists do, after all, want the state to go away eventually! As the FdCA points out, we can agree with the Marxists on “the type of society which it is intended to realise”; the difference relates to methods of getting there, and how different social and historical analysis informs different methods. And once we leave the Marxists off our list of “anarchists”, can we find anything in common among all the remaining anti-statists?

Following Schmidt and Van der Walt, I propose to return to the approach of Bakunin and Makhno — which, as I have said, is also the approach of the FdCA, although the final chapter of its paper falls short in certain respects. I note that there is, after all, a movement of the oppressed classes, of great historical importance, that began with Bakunin and the First International, and has remained pretty consistent in its ideas and practices. A movement based on class struggle, on direct action, on the liberation of the workers by the workers, organised federally, horizontally, directly-democratically for this purpose, aiming at the destruction of private property, of capitalism and the state, and at the establishment of a society of free equals. It is this movement that historically gave currency to the name “anarchism”: words and ideas, after all, are shaped by history and by material circumstances. By looking at where tendencies stand in relation to the ideas and practices of this movement, we can find a way of saying who is an anarchist and who isn't.

To begin with, let us turn this light on those who the FdCA designates as Individualists — those influenced by the ideas of Max Stirner. Here is what the paper says about them:

The basic idea . . . was that the measure of freedom was equal to the amount of the individual's independence, which showed a total lack of regard for the fact that Man [sic] is a social animal. All Man's achievements . . . were obtained only thanks to human society. They are the fruit of billions upon billions of anonymous contributions to the creation of the well-being and

evolution of the species. Humankind today lives in such a thick web of relations between all its past and present members, that the total freedom of one isolated being as a single individual is a philosophical category which is totally removed from reality. Starting with this improbable supposition, the individualists began to cut themselves off from all social groupings and to despise the masses (whom they thought slavishly obeyed power) and ended up considering Anarchism as a fight against authority and the State and not as a struggle for a egalitarian society.

Certainly not a theory that has anything to do with class struggle! Indeed, this passage underlines an important point about the working class anarchist movement: our ideas and practices only make sense on the assumption that human beings are, indeed, social animals, not isolated atomic independent individuals — an idea that is as completely absurd as the FdCA says it is. This point was made by Bakunin and has been reiterated by many anarchist theorists. And it is hardly surprising, as the FdCA points out, that we find “anarcho-individualists” and “anarcho-capitalists”, influenced by these ideas, defending capitalism and the freedom to exploit against any state restrictions that might somehow hinder exploitation. If you refuse to recognise the depth of social interconnectedness, if you refuse to see that your own well-being is tied to that of others, why not just go out and exploit everyone else for your own enrichment, and fight anyone who tries to stop you?

Even so, as the FdCA points out, some Individualists “have remained actively militant among the proletariat”; some have identified or associated with the historical anarchist movement. Neither ideas nor material conditions can determine exactly what every individual will do; ideas and practices are often confused; the world is a messy place. But even if some “anarcho-individualists” have in some sense been part of the anarchist movement, there is nothing in common between Individualist ideas and anarchist ideas, or between the practices that are naturally associated with these two ways of thinking. If “anarcho-individualism” is a movement at all, it is not an anarchist movement; it does not belong, ideologically or historically, with a collective class struggle movement embodying an appreciation of the social nature of humanity. And the same goes for the Educationists, those who hold “that education can suffice to change man’s nature, even before changing the material conditions of existence”. Such a view is incompatible with historical materialism and contradicts the practices of class struggle anarchism. Again, there may be people associated with the anarchist movement who hold such views and/or act in a way compatible with such views; but there could just as well be such individuals outside. Educationism is no more an anarchist movement than Individualism is. (*See Appendix A*)

The FdCA's discussion of anti-organisationists raises trickier questions. We may first ask what could be the motivation for a rejection of organisation. I suggest that one obvious cause for such views is simple confusion, and that there is one very obvious source of such confusion, derived from the workings and from the dominant ideologies of the oppressive societies we live in: the idea that organisation is necessarily authoritarian and hierarchical. From this view one can reason in two ways. The defender of authority says: organisation implies hierarchical authority; organisation is necessary; therefore hierarchical authority is necessary. The anti-organisationist says: organisation implies hierarchical authority; hierarchical authority is destructive; therefore organisation is destructive. Anarchists reject both these arguments, for we deny that organisation needs to be either authoritarian or hierarchical. Of course, the confusions are seldom as clearly stated as I have put them; it is the nature of confusion to be confused. But such ways of thinking may have a lot to do with a lot of anti-organisationism. (It is up to anarchists to show how organisation can work without hierarchical authority — but history furnishes us with abundant evidence, and we have risen to the challenge so successfully that I need not elaborate here.)

It is worth noting that many supposed anti-organisationists like Luigi Galleani, were in fact organised, albeit into small conspiratorial cells. It beggars the imagination why such cells, should they be agreed, not unite into wider anarchist federations of like mind.

However, the anti-organisationism with which the FdCA is concerned — “Anarcho-Communism” — has a different root. Before discussing this, I must note that the paper's terminology lends itself to confusion. How am I going to remember that “Anarcho-Communism” involves opposition to organisation and that “Anarchist Communism” supports it, with definite ideas on how it should work? In Italian the terms are, respectively, “anarco-comunismo” and “comunismo anarchico”, with the word order reversed for the different tendencies; but it still seems odd to give such different traditions names that are built by combining the same pair of words! I must suppose that these usages are fairly standard in Italy, and that Italian working class militants will look beyond etymology and know what movements and ideas are being discussed. Words are shaped by history; but I have to say that this choice of words is not one I could recommend for myself, or for anyone who does not share the experiences that have made these words standard in the Italian movement. To me, “anarcho-communism” and “anarchist communism” both suggest communism combined with anarchism. And this logical understanding, alas, has almost nothing to do with the Italian usage.

I have identified anarchism as a historical movement of the working class, aimed at the destruction by the workers themselves of oppressive and exploitative

structures. What, then, is communism? I must note that the original use of the word was — is — in relation to the world we are fighting for: a society in which production is run according to the principle “from each according to ability, to each according to need”; hence a society without exploitation, without private property, money or exchange. Communism is commonly contrasted, for instance, with Collectivism, which the FdCA identifies as being based on the principle “to each according to labour”. I am not sure whether this is an adequate characterisation of collectivism, whether the term is always strictly used in this way; but at any rate, it is usually taken to refer to a productive system that, while not communist, is not supposed to be exploitative. (The word “socialism” is even more confusing. It is sometimes taken in contrast with communism, or, as the FdCA does, with both communism and collectivism; at other times it is used as a vague umbrella term for any non-exploitative system, implying that communism is a *kind* of socialism — as we communists will tell you, it is the best kind.)

Naturally, all these words are shaped by history and by material conditions. It is no surprise that the communist principle, which is thoroughly opposed to exploitation, has won most support in the revolutionary movement of the exploited; indeed, there would be some point in saying that this movement is the communist movement. But the specific application of the term has changed over time. As the FdCA notes, although Marx used the word “communism” from the 1840s, “it was the anarchists who first adopted the term on a wide scale . . . around the end of the 19th century”. At this time, the Marxists favoured the term “Social Democracy”: their most powerful presence was in the German Social Democratic Party, whose objective was to gain control of the bourgeois state through elections. As a result, the term “Social Democracy” — previously used by Bakunin in the name of his Alliance! — came to stand for class collaboration, for the futile effort by movements based in the working class to reach some kind of compromise with the exploiter.

The FdCA adds: “It was only after the Russian Revolution of October 1917 that Marxist parties all over the world returned to the use of the adjective communist. By that stage, though, Anarchist Communists had already been using the term for around half a century as a synonym of class-struggle Anarchism.” And when the Bolsheviks took the name, its meaning became twisted: it has come to stand for the highly authoritarian, centralised, exploitative and repressive states built by Vladimir Lenin and his imitators, which have nothing in common with communism in its original meaning. To be fair, the Leninists tended not to claim that their states were actually communist; as Marxist determinists, they regarded them as a stage on the road to communism; and it was in keeping with their own commitment to this great goal — a commitment that in some cases may actually

have been sincere — that they designated their organisations as Communist Parties. But to call Bolshevik Russia communist is to forget what the word always meant, to lose sight of what communism is, and, indeed, of what capitalism is, since I have pointed out that Bolshevik Russia was capitalist. Much effort has been put into taking the word “communism” away from the revolutionary workers’ movement. “Socialism” has become more confused still: today it will be claimed by almost anyone who is even slightly uncomfortable with the capitalist “free market”. But the word “communism”, at least, is one that we should take back. Just as we aim in the future to expropriate the expropriators of our labour, so, even now, we can expropriate the expropriators of our words.

Disentangling Kropotkin

But what shall we do with these words once we take them back? Let me return to the FdCA’s efforts. The paper describes the views of the “Anarcho-Communists” as follow:

Anarchism was no longer the goal of the conscious efforts on the part of men and women to organise themselves for their collective happiness, but only the final and teleologically predetermined stage in historical development (as we shall see, somewhat like the dialectic materialism of Stalinist orthodoxy which stemmed from the same positivist vein). The result of all this . . . was that all forms of organisation are not only unnecessary (given that the course of events cannot be seriously influenced) but actually dangerous, as they represent an obstruction for the free flow of the process’ spontaneity and impede the appearance of the final stage in the development of humanity . . . As a result of their deterministic vision, Anarcho-Communists place no importance in the class struggle. Furthermore, they consider even the existence of classes to be an unproven fact, if not some Marxist invention.

I must note that the term “teleology” refers to the view that history tends towards a definite goal: in the case of the “Anarcho-Communists” (and, for that matter, those of orthodox Marxists and Leninists, who also take a teleological view) this goal would be a free, stateless communist society. A wonderful goal, to be sure; but the FdCA’s highly pertinent point is that if you think the world is going there anyway, it may not be that much incentive to work towards it. (Alternatively, it may discourage you from thinking about what *really* needs to be done to get there, which, I suspect, is part of why Marx was so ready to incorporate the absurdity of a “workers’ state” into his historical theory.) The picture the

FdCA paints of “Anarcho-Communists” is a picture of political complacency, of expecting the mighty force of History to do all your work for you.

The paper attributes this confusion to Kropotkin, a leading Russian anarchist thinker at the end of the 19th century. But I must submit that this is somewhat unfair. Certainly there is a very strong teleological element in Kropotkin’s thought — a teleology that differs from Marx’s teleology, most obviously by rejecting any positive role for the state. But such teleology is not unusual among anarchists of that time. It can be seen in Bakunin, particularly in his more philosophical writings, such as *God and the State*. Although the FdCA is correct to say teleological thinking can lead to political errors, Bakunin and others show that it need not automatically do so. And with Kropotkin, it did not — at least not so obviously or to such an extent as the FdCA suggests. Far from “placing no importance in the class struggle”, Kropotkin was deeply committed to it. His book *The Conquest of Bread* opens with a penetrating critique of capitalism and moves on to a detailed discussion of how the workers can realise their material needs in a revolutionary situation — beginning with the need to expropriate the expropriators. The writer of this book was not one to dismiss class struggle, and shows no signs of being one to dismiss organisation. (See *Appendix B* for more on Kropotkin’s positions)

It is true that later in his life, Kropotkin grew to be disconnected from the mass anarchist movement, to the point that on the outbreak of World War 1, he decisively broke with anarchist principles by backing British and French imperialism. But the FdCA makes no reference to any such changing views. It traces the ideas of “Anarcho-Communists” to Kropotkin and identifies him quite straightforwardly as their precursor and founder. Indeed, it is easy to see how teleological anti-organisationists could turn to Kropotkin for support for their views — but in so doing, they utterly fail to take note of the depth of his thought. And I am sorry to say that in relegating Kropotkin to the “Anarcho-Communist” ranks, the FdCA does the same.

Certainly teleological — and other — anti-organisationist views can be found in many individuals associated with the anarchist movement. But such views, particularly when taken to the extreme of dismissing class struggle as the FdCA describes them, are clearly in conflict with the views and practices of the anarchist movement, as I and my ZACF comrades have analysed it. Individualists and Educationists may call themselves anarchists, and associate with the anarchist movement, but that does not make them anarchists, and it does not make their tendencies anarchist tendencies. (See *Appendix A*) And the same goes for “Anarcho-Communists”. The fact that they trace their views to Kropotkin — or to their own distorted picture of Kropotkin — does not make them anarchists, and I won’t call them anarchists. But if everyone knows them by that name in Italy, perhaps there’s no avoiding it.

The FdCA notes a similarity between the “Kropotkinists” and the Insurrectionist Anarchists, a tendency that gained prominence towards the end of the 19th century. The paper explains:

The hope was that the spread of violent acts directed at the pompous bourgeoisie of the period would provide an example which would rapidly be imitated thereby transforming the insurrectionary spark into an immense revolutionary blaze. This was the period of the bloody acts of the likes of François-Claudius Köhlingstein (better known as Ravachol), Bonnot, Émile Henry and many others. France, in fact, though at the centre of the insurrectionalist wave was also the place where class-struggle Anarchist militants (Émile Pouget, Fernand Pelloutier, Pierre Monatte, and others) found a way out through the formation of the “Bourses du Travail” and the syndicates and thereby brought Anarchism back to its natural element, the proletariat, which led to a new and profound method of struggle and organisation. Despite this, there are still today those who as a result of a childish theoretical simplification, hold that gains made by the unions are ephemeral and who continue to preach the idea of propaganda by the deed. They are mistaken twice over. Firstly, when they think that syllogisms can cancel history — in other words they believe, with purely abstract reasoning, that as long as capitalism exists there can be no improvement in the living conditions of the masses even where there have been labour struggles. Secondly, they are under the illusion that some external example can be more attractive and convincing than long, tiring educational activity within the day-to-day struggles.

The similarity to “Anarcho-Communists” lies in the dismissal of large-scale class struggle under capitalism, and in the substitution of abstract general historical principles for the hard work of analysis and organisation. But there are differences. Insurrectionists, after all, do engage in acts of struggle against the bourgeoisie, and they do organise themselves — even if we agree that organisation in small groups to carry out bloody acts of revenge is not, in fact, an effective way of building the revolutionary struggle. And historically, the insurrectionist tendency very clearly belongs to the broad anarchist movement. The FdCA reinforces the link between insurrectionism and “Anarcho-Communism” by pointing out that Kropotkin supported the strategy of propaganda by the deed — but this, again, is unfair to Kropotkin, since many other leading anarchists, not all of them followers of his views, were present at the congress that adopted this strategy in 1881. Insurrectionism enjoyed a great deal of support within the anarchist movement for some time; many leading anarchists moved towards it, only to

see its failure and then move away from it. Indeed, Van der Walt and Schmidt identify insurrectionism as one distinct tendency within the anarchist movement, a minority tendency, in contrast to the majority tendency of “mass anarchism”, of broad-based class struggle movements, which is the approach favoured by the ZACF and the FdCA. In fact, Kropotkin was one of the first leading anarchists to move away from insurrectionist propaganda by the deed, and towards organised mass anarchism.

How many threads?

Within the mass anarchist movement, a tendency is commonly drawn between “anarchist communism” and “anarcho-syndicalism” – but there seems to be little clarity on what divides them. I will not go into the subtleties, but note how the FdCA points to some genuine distinctions:

Anarcho-Syndicalists of various types and Revolutionary Syndicalists lay their trust in the spontaneous evolution of the proletarian masses and that accordingly if the labour unions are left alone, sooner or later they will arrive at the decisive clash with the boss class. Malatesta already opposed this idea, held by Monatte, in 1907 at the International Congress of Amsterdam. He clarified how the proletariat’s associations for resistance would inevitably slide into reformism, thus blurring sight of the goals . . . The historically proven decline of all unions which were born revolutionary (starting with Monatte’s own CGT), has led some Anarcho-Syndicalists to seek the answer not in political organisation, but in the creation of unions which are based on a pre-determined revolutionary idea. In other words, to create unions which are exclusively composed of conscious, revolutionary elements. The result is a strange mix of mass organisation and political organisation which is basically an organisation of anarchists who set themselves up to do union work. In this way the obstacle has not been removed, but avoided, as the link which connects the masses to the revolutionary strategy is missing, unless of course it happens to be the resurrection of the idea of an external example which contaminates the masses by some process of osmosis.

It is certainly true that many who identify themselves as “anarcho-syndicalists” have fallen into one or the other of the above-mentioned errors; but although these ways of drawing the distinction are quite widespread, I am not at all sure if they are universal. I am not sure if everyone who calls themselves “anarcho-syndicalist” would reject the need for a specific political organisation. The ZACF

tends to follow the usage of the Platform: “Whereas communism, i.e. the free society of equal workers, is the goal of the anarchist struggle, syndicalism, i.e. the revolutionary movement of industrial workers based on trades, is but one of the forms of the revolutionary class struggle.” But we recognise that there are a variety of views on the role of the unions in the struggle.

Identifying these different views with particular tendencies is a lot trickier. Let us look at our own tendency, the tendency of the ZACF and the FdCA, which our comrades identify as “Anarchist Communism”. Their paper rightly identifies Bakunin as the founder of this tendency; but also notes (in chapter 3) that he was a collectivist rather than a communist! (Bakunin may have been uncomfortable with communism partly because in his day it was associated with Marxist authoritarianism; it was only later that a fully communist anarchist theory was developed. And as the FdCA notes, his writing is unsystematic and scattered: it may not be easy to tell where exactly he stood on the organisation of production in a free society.) It seems odd to call your tendency “communist” when its founder appears not to have been a communist. Here again, there is some historical precedent: many in our tendency have, indeed, identified themselves as anarchist communists; and many organisations of our tendency today use the term in their names, including the the FdCA and the ZACF. But it still seems odd to use this name for our tendency, when (a) it includes non-communists, notably its founder; and (b) there are anarchists who are communists but do not belong to our tendency. Why not identify ourselves as organisational dualists, especifistas, or, for some of us — perhaps the more theoretically and practically rigorous, perhaps old-fashioned — platformists?

This is one example of the difficulty in drawing distinctions within the mass anarchist movement. Can we come up with a really neat classification incorporating such questions as who is a communist and who isn't; who doesn't want to engage in workplace struggles, who does, and in what way; who rejects a specific organisation, who supports it, and of those who support it, who prefers an organisation of tendency and who (like Volin) opts for an organisation of synthesis? I doubt if this is truly possible, or if it would throw much light on the history of anarchism, on how the mass movement has interacted with the system of production. Hence, Van der Walt and Schmidt stick with insurrectionism versus mass anarchism as the main distinction and do not try to draw such messy and unfortunate lines as between, say, syndicalists and communists. That is not to say there are no distinctive threads within the tangle of the mass anarchist movement: clearly there are, and the thread that runs from Bakunin to (among others) the ZACF and the FdCA is one of them. (We like to think it is a particularly coherent and important one.)

Conclusion: no need to get tied up

I have devoted much attention to the flaws in the FdCA's classification of anarchist tendencies; but the fact remains that the ideas that the paper refers to are ideas that really exist, and are generally in need of critique; and its criticisms are entirely on target. If the FdCA's map of the terrain is less than perfect (and whose map could not stand some improvement?), this does not stop our comrades from directing their fire with perfect accuracy at just the targets they need to hit. The only significant misfiring is in the case of Kropotkin.

Nor is the discussion of anarchist tendencies confined to shooting down confusionists: it includes important positive points. Among these, I note the need for anarchists to defend certain roles of the state: the welfare state, which enables "a minimum redistribution of wealth in favour of the workers; as the result of decades of struggles they have allowed the conflict to be regulated for the protection of the weakest". Not to say that the state should not be "abolished right from the first moment of the revolution", but to be aware in daily struggles of the immediate needs of the working class. This is an important point for many of the struggles in which the ZACF is engaged. As popular movements in South Africa today fight for free housing, water and electricity, we consistently call for the use of direct action in these struggles; but we hope to achieve these things within capitalism, and we know that it is only the state that can reasonably provide them.

Another important point — on which the ZACF has much to learn, notably from the FdCA — is the need for a programme, for definite short-term and medium-term objectives, based on a thorough analysis, including economic analysis, of the existing situation. In this connection, the FdCA notes the value of tactical and strategic alliances with militants of other tendencies, pointing out: "Anarchist Communists are so sure of their historical ends, of their strategy for obtaining them and of the steps they must take today, that they do not fear any impure contact contaminating them. On the contrary, they believe that they can contaminate others."

This is just one part of our comrades' very thorough and deep analysis. Much of this review has been devoted to weak points in their paper, and more could be said on these; but far more still could be said on its strong points. And on these, *A Question of Class* is best left to speak for itself.

Appendices

A. REDEFINING ANARCHIST CURRENTS:

Michael Schmidt writes: “There is strangely, in the view of myself and Lucien van der Walt, detailed in our book *Black Flame: the Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, no historically definable “anarchist-communist” current at all. No doubt the WSM in Ireland, the FdCA and others of our tendency would be surprised at this position, but it has a solid grounding in historical fact: that “pure anarchist communists” like Hatta Shuzo of Japan were in fact not anti-syndicalist (merely recognised the limitations of the single, mass organisation without the specific organisation, as did Errico Malatesta and others) and in fact worked within the syndicalist movement to reunite the “anarchist communist” *Zenkoku Jiren* with the “anarcho-syndicalist” *Nihon Jikyo*. So if even the “purists” were not anti-syndicalist, and the “anti-organisationists” like Luigi Galleani were in fact organised, albeit on a smaller affinity-group scale, who is it in fact, that is opposed to the mass line approach that the majority of the historical anarchist movement adopted?

“Of the anarchists who can rightfully claim that title by their revolutionary free-communist class orientation, the only ones who reject the mass line are those who believe in the uselessness of reforms, believing that the “revolutionary gymnasium” of union organising etc only saps the workers’ strength through the infection of bourgeois norms, and draws them into fatal compromises with the state, capital and the elitist project (here the ZACF prefers the FdCA’s confidence that revolutionary ideas can infect the class organisations instead). Anarchist-insurrectionists find their solution to class mobilisation in the precipitation of spontaneous and voluntary mass revolt by catalytic deeds. Although this position comes close to some left-communist and some council communist positions, there is nothing inherently un-anarchist about their analysis, although just as the mass line can succumb to reformism, so the insurgent line can succumb to substitutionism.

“However, Lucien and I accepted that in many cases, anarchist insurgency and guerrilla warfare took place not in isolation, but as the defensive arms of mass popular organisations. Here we may give honourable mention to the fighters of the Organización Popular Revolucionaria-33 (OPR-33) in Uruguay which acted in defence of wildcat strikes by the CNT union and other popular mobilisations against neo-fascist repression in 1971–1976, of Resistencia Libertaria (RL) in Argentina which defended worker’s autonomy against the ultra-right which organised the

murderous Galtieri military coup in 1976, of the Movimiento Ibérica Libertaria (MIL) which operated underground in Spain against the Francoist dictatorship in 1971–1974, and of the Workers’ Liberation Group (*Shagila*) of Iraq and Scream of the People (CHK) of Iran which defended the factory soviets (*shoras*) and grass-roots neighbourhood committees (*kommitehs*) during the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979. A more familiar example to most would be the *Los Solidarios* group in Spain in the 1920s was not merely running around assassinating people at whim, but that they had been formed by the famed anarcho-syndicalist CNT union federation as a secret, yet official, defensive arm responding to real and deadly repression.

“Other than the anarchist-insurrectionists, there remains only the “classless individualists” who, we of our tendency are all agreed, by denying the social nature of humanity and the necessity for class struggle for socialism-from-below, break with the foundations of anarchism and are thus non-anarchist, while the “philosophical educationists,” where they do not deny the class struggle, are simply poor anarchists in that they have withdrawn from social activism. Thus we say, “anarchist-communism” at base is simply a synonym for what today is often called “social anarchism” and mostly historically adheres to the mass line which includes syndicalist approaches.

“The only further distinction then becomes between “anarcho-syndicalism” that defines specifically as anarchist (such as our comrades of the CNT-France and others), which has the strength of recognising its anarchist roots, but the weakness of not being able to embrace all workers on the basis of economic commonality – because it is a mass organisation trying to be at the same time a specific organisation, and “revolutionary syndicalism” that does not define itself as anarchist (the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] and others), which has the disadvantage that it will attract reformists and state-socialists into its ranks, but the advantage that it can embrace all workers (although the IWW often also suffers from the conundrum of trying to be sufficient in itself without an affiliated specific anarchist organisation). Other than that, there are also specific organisations that do see syndicalism as inherently reformist and therefore a dead loss, but most are of our tendency which see organisational dualism as crucial. This is the crux of the argument between the International Workers’ Association (IWA) and those of our tendency: the IWA sees syndicalism alone as sufficiently revolutionary because their unions are specifically anarchist, while we believe syndicalism should be non-specific because of the class nature of trade unions, but as a result needs to be allied to specific organisations which provide anarchist content. One of the determining factors in which argument is correct is, crudely, the numbers: the IWA declines while the tendency today represented in the

organisations of the anarkismo project and the unaffiliated syndicalist unions, grows.”

James Pendlebury comments: “*There is a bit more to say about the ‘educationists’.* The FdCA defines this supposed tendency as those who hold ‘that education can suffice to change man’s nature, even before changing the material conditions of existence’. That is, they deny class struggle as a key factor in history. Schmidt allows for such a position, but also emphasises those who ‘do not deny the class struggle [but] are simply poor anarchists in that they have withdrawn from social activism’. No doubt both these approaches have their adherents — and there are probably those who sit somewhere in between. But the important point, from the perspective of Schmidt, Van der Walt and myself, is that neither approach can be legitimately regarded as a distinct anarchist tendency.”

B. ON PIOTR KROPOTKIN’S IDEOLOGY:

1. On his turn from insurrectionism: see Daniel Guerin’s *Anarchism* chapter 3 at: www.infoshop.org
“Kropotkin deserves credit for being one of the first to confess his errors and to recognise the sterility of ‘propaganda by the deed.’ In a series of articles which appeared in 1890 he affirmed ‘that one must be with the people, who no longer want isolated acts, but want men of action inside their ranks.’ He warned his readers against ‘the illusion that one can defeat the coalition of exploiters with a few pounds of explosives.’ He proposed a return to mass trade unionism like that of which the First International had been the embryo and propagator: ‘Monster unions embracing millions of proletarians’.”
2. Kropotkin versus Russian purist “anarcho-communists” [From Black Flame] Kropotkin [produced] *Kleb i Volya* for Russian distribution to combat the “Anarchist Communist” tendency within syndicalism.[i] He believed revolutionary unions were “absolutely necessary”. [ii]
[i] Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* pp.54, 61, 63, 84, 107; also see Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* p. 68
[ii] Quoted in John Crump, *Hatta Shuzo and Pure Anarchism in Interwar Japan* p.10. Contrary to Alain Pengam, it is no illusion to speak of a syndicalist Kropotkin: Pengam, *Anarcho-Communism*, p.249
3. Kropotkin on organisational dualism: [From Black Flame; for more, see etc. “*Shall We Concern Ourselves with . . .*”, and *Revolutionary Minorities*]
“For Kropotkin, it was the ‘party which has made the most revolutionary propaganda and which has shown the most spirit and daring’ that ‘will be listened to on the day when it is necessary to act, to march in front in order

to realise the revolution' [i]. He considered it necessary 'to plan for the penetration of the masses and their stimulation by libertarian militants, in much the same way as the Alliance acted within the International' [ii]. Rejecting the notion that the unions were spontaneously revolutionary [and without need of a specific organisation marching alongside them], Kropotkin argued: 'there is need of the other element Malatesta speaks of and which Bakunin always professed' [iii]. Malatesta had argued that 'Bakunin expected a great deal from the International; yet, at the same time he created the Alliance, a secret organisation with a well-determined programme — atheist, socialist, anarchist, revolutionary' [iv]."

[i] P. Kropotkin, [1880] 1970, "The Spirit of Revolt", In *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets: a collection of writings by Peter Kropotkin*, edited by R.N. Baldwin. New York: Dover Publications p. 43

[ii] Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism* p. 277, emphasis in the original

[iii] Quoted in Ibid. p. 281, emphasis in the original

[iv] Quoted in Ibid. p. 130

4. Kropotkin on the class struggle: from *Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles*, 1887, www.fourmilab.ch . This text strongly illustrates Kropotkin's teleological thinking, but at the same time shows his understanding of class and belief in class struggle.

From *An Appeal to the Young*, www.dis.org

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James Pendlebury
Tangled Threads of Revolution
2009

“Anarchist Communists: a Question of Class” is a theoretical position paper of the FdCA of Italy and a key contemporary exposition of the principles of anarchist communism – the principles of, among other organisations, the FdCA and southern Africa’s ZACF.

This critical review of “Question of Class” appeared in abridged form (for space reasons) in Zabalaza #10 (April 2009). The review is now published in full.

Question of Class can be read online at www.fdca.it
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