

VAN DER WALT, LUCIEN and MICHAEL SCHMIDT. *Black Flame. The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism.* [Counterpower, Vol. 1.] AK Press, Edinburgh [etc.] 2009. 395 pp. \$22.95; doi:10.1017/S0020859010000362

The aim of *Black Flame* is to examine the ideas and history of a once neglected anarchist movement. The principal ambitions of the authors are threefold: to establish the parameters of this movement, to trace its global history and to demonstrate its continuing power as a counter to neo-liberal globalization. This first volume provides the theoretical framework for the analysis and examines the history of the movement from the latter part of the nineteenth century to the start of World War II. The second volume promises to pick up the story of the movement's international development from the 1940s and show its continued relevance to modern political struggles. The relationship between anarchism and syndicalism is the book's central focus and the first part of this volume is devoted to showing the necessity of this relationship. For Schmidt and Van der Walt syndicalism – or class struggle anarchism – is not merely one possible form of anarchism, it is its only coherent expression (p. 19).

Fully aware of the contentiousness of this claim, the authors support it carefully: their argument is extremely well structured, based on an impressive knowledge of anarchist thought and a mastery of the available historical sources. They anticipate objections to their thesis and meet these forcefully. For example, Malatesta is not recruited to their cause before his debate with Pierre Monatte in 1907 is scrutinized. Similarly, in seeking to downplay the differences between anarchist communism and anarcho-syndicalism, the authors acknowledge Kropotkin's tendency to differentiate the two and his keenness to enrich the former with an ancient pre-history. Distinguishing between principles, strategies, and tactics, the authors are able to explain the complex internal politics of the movement and make sense of the confusing grounds of syndicalist disagreements.

Their account is rich in detail. At times, the short sketches of key activists and thinkers interrupts the flow of the analysis, but these introductions to lesser or unknown anarchists give the text real depth. More importantly, their interest in world movements – from Argentina to modern-day Zimbabwe – enables them to challenge the claims that the Spanish experience was an exceptional success in a history of anarchist failure and that anarchism effectively died in 1939 with Franco's victory in the Spanish Civil War.

Of course, none of this argumentation lessens the contentiousness of the claim that the broad anarchist tradition extends to figures who considered themselves Marxists – Bill Haywood for example – whilst excluding established notables – Godwin, Stirner, and Tolstoy – as well as a host of other self-identifying anarchists, including Proudhon. The politics of the book reflects a desire to divorce anarchism from free-market libertarianism. Insofar as this leads the authors to challenge the legalistic approach adopted by the little-read Paul Eltzbacher, their case is unimpeachable. Nevertheless their rejection of the claim that anti-statism is a sufficient condition for anarchism is a narrow starting point which leaves open the possibility of acknowledging its necessity and of defining anti-statism in different ways – precisely the move they make in presenting their critique of Marxism.

At the risk that some readers might confuse Rothbard with Rocker, the authors construct what appears to be a very exclusive “broad” tradition. Their endorsement of Bookchin's critique of lifestyle anarchism and the replication of his individualist/collectivist and egoist/solidarist binaries heightens the sense that they are also throwing down a gauntlet to syndicalism's critics, not merely driving a wedge between socialist

anarchism and the libertarian right. To the extent that it does this, the book raises the prospect of an endless argument about inclusion: didn't Kropotkin consider Tolstoy an anarchist? And what about Landauer, Ibsen, or Marcel Duchamp? Moreover, it tends towards a selective interest in anarchist theory: Kropotkin's idea of mutual aid attracts more attention than either his celebration of individual initiative or his critique of authority. Thinking about why Eltzbacher made the selection he did rather than the definition he derived from it might have offered a more productive point of departure and one more consistent with the authors' interest in historical contexts. Their aims could have been met equally well without arguing that syndicalism exhausts anarchism's ground. Indeed, since the historical study of the global anarchist movement is subordinated to this definitional debate, their approach seems counterproductive.

The claim that anarchism begins in the 1860s not only involves a denial of the elaborate pre-history that Kropotkin and other were wont to give it but also the actual history of the Proudhonian movement. Some readers will undoubtedly take issue with the short shrift Proudhon is given in this account (cited as an key influence, with Marx, his work is not examined in nearly the same detail) but the methodological questions that his exclusion raises are about the relationship between ideas and action, the understanding of ideology and role that theory – and, indeed, marginal theorists – play in movement politics. It is as if Bakunin's Alliance of Social Democracy emerged on a blank political canvas and that the Enlightenment principles which the authors identify with it had only one root and meaning. In a discussion of the French CGT they argue that the appearance of the term 'syndicalism' does not imply the rise of a new movement, acknowledging that concepts might precede their manifestation (pp. 155, 158). Yet insistent that anarchism remained an empty idea before the 1860s, they seem to suggest that it is impossible to analyse the historical movement without first determining what it stood for (p. 43). The result is not so much a history of the movement as a version of history which allows anarchism to be filled in prescribed manner.

Theoretically, the important issues the book raises turn on the authors' defence of Platformism. In these chapters they reflect on problems of democracy, individual–community relations, solidarity, and revolutionary commitment. Against the critics, they argue that syndicalism is neither workerist nor statist, though it is consistent with libertarian leadership, discipline, co-ordinated action, and the acceptance of a common programme which allows for coercion (p. 263). Whilst all of these ideas are explained, their defence at times rests on a claim that there is no viable alternative and the concepts themselves are under-theorized. For example, the argument for formal organization is supported by an observation that anti-organizational anarchists cannot overcome the tyrannies associated with structurelessness (p. 240). The discussion of syndicalist community projects (pp. 183–187) links the idea of the counterculture to the propaganda needs of the movement; however, the German SPD spawned a host of clubs and societies and it's not clear that party attitudes and behaviours were any more libertarian as a result. Similarly, democracy is linked un-problematically with majoritarianism (p. 257).

Drawing on a principle of voluntary agreement, the authors argue that exit provides a sufficient safeguard against organizational coercion. This proviso is offered to meet the anxieties of "individualists" concerned about the Bolshevization of anarchist organizations, but it was Locke who famously developed the idea of tacit consent and its inadequacies were probed by Hume, who argued that agreement on these terms was tantamount to telling a hostage on a boat that s/he was free to jump into the ocean to

escape the domination of the kidnapper. Not engaging with recent anarchist political theory, questions about the institutionalization of rules, the internalization of norms, and self-censorship are not just unresolved, they are sidestepped and the authors turn to history to bolster their position. It seems that there is no evidence that syndicalism was ever troubled with problems of dissent, coercion or internal oppression. “Abstract” thinkers like Voline who suggested otherwise were simply mistaken and anyway lacked a sense of social responsibility (p. 261).

A similar strategy is used in the discussion of feminism. Distancing themselves from “anarchist” and “anarcha-feminism”, Schmidt and Van der Walt resurrect the idea of class-gender priority which became the mainstay of socialist/Marxist feminism in the 1970s. The “struggle for women’s rights was part of the larger class struggle” (p. 298). In this frame, Proudhon’s misogyny is only another indication that he fell outside the broad tradition, and although there is no discussion of patriarchy or radical feminism and gender is treated in narrowly heterosexual terms, movement history indicates a consistent commitment to feminism.

*Black Flame* is an important book which brilliantly synthesizes the histories of a set of movements which are still largely neglected. The disappointment of the book is the rigidity of the claims it makes about those movements: the equally rich history of cultural experimentation, disobedience, and protest is unreasonably and unnecessarily marginalized. The book formalizes a boundary between anarchists and others which is troubling. At one point the authors consider the problems that Tolstoyans might pose for syndicalist organizations (!). To extend membership to these non-anarchists, they argue, would compromise and undermine the class struggle (p. 246). Perhaps. But this worry points to a peculiar idea of prefiguration or an overly optimistic view about social homogeneity and the unwillingness to regard anyone but fellow syndicalists as anarchist looks sectarian.

Schmidt and Van der Walt say there are not dismissive of non-syndicalist anti-authoritarian traditions and that their purpose is better to understand them (p. 19). Yet having first defined the outside, they end up recommending bone fide anarchist organizations to exclude and ignore it. There is seemingly no need to negotiate disagreements. This sets up a political problem which is unlikely to be resolved except by declarations of heresy and the use of force. Whilst the history of the movements that the authors outline is inspiring and empowering, their positioning creates a palpable sense of powerlessness for those who don’t tick the right definitional boxes. Schmidt and Van der Walt say that they want to encourage debate (p. 27), but this requires that the arguments of opponents are taken seriously and engaged with – not sidelined. In seeking to recover a forgotten history, they seem to have lost sight of this.

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*The Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History*, edited by Aaron Brenner, Benjamin Day, and Immanuel Ness, is self-admittedly non-encyclopedic in that, “A comprehensive explanation of the hundreds of thousands of strikes in US history would be impossible”