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BOOK REVIEW

Debating Anarchism: A History of Action, Ideas, and Movements, by Mike Finn, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, x+282 pp., $75.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781350118119, $24.95 (paperback), ISBN: 9781350118102, $22.45 (e-book) ISBN: 9781350118133

Hundreds of authors have constructed anarchist hobgoblins, perpetuated misunderstandings, and narrowed the range of anarchist thought. Yet recent decades have seen a revival of a sympathetic, yet more accurate, accounting of anarchist history and philosophy, taking place loosely under the moniker of 'anarchist studies'. Mike Finn's *Debating Anarchism* is an accessible, thoughtful, and compelling example of this new historiography.

Instead of dodging the blemishes emphasized by past historians (e.g., anarchist assassins, utopianism), Finn strives to contextualize anarchist practice – e.g., not to justify or condemn violence, but to explain it – and thus seeks to look beyond the hype surrounding anarchism. Crucially, this multifaceted analysis contributes toward decolonizing the movement's history and explains how each anarchist generation adapted to new circumstances, thus refining anarchist thought.

Finn avoids standard tropes (e.g., anarchism is a negligible force, the product of a few elite intellectuals, or merely a European affair); instead, he locates anarchism's modern genesis within Industrial Age radical movements, alongside its socialist siblings. While *Debating Anarchism*'s narrative is driven by recognizable giants like Peter Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta, and Emma Goldman, Finn's history also emphasizes the ideas of lesser known but crucial figures, like Charlotte Wilson, James Guillaume, Louise Michel, August Vaillant, M.P.T. Acharya, Osugi Sakae, and Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin.

Finn complicates common anarchist historiography, noting anarchism changed overtime and was never monolithic. In order to 'see anarchism', he juxtaposes a little-a anarchism (following in the spirit of anarchism, while often not labeled so), with a big-A Anarchism (self-consciously linked to past anarchists and anarchist ideas). These anarchisms stretch across two major time periods – classic and contemporary – which, although linked, existed in different contexts.

Although anarchist history usually begins with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Finn argues that classical anarchism's formation involved thousands of activists, working across many national borders – and didn't magically result from Mikhail Bakunin's first fruitful meeting with Proudhon. Its European origins coincided with growing inequality and the old feudal era's demise following the Revolutions of 1848, dynamics accompanied by Proudhon's evolving insights regarding property and representation. Notably, anarchism became a movement via the First International (a socialist network, spiritually and tactically led by Marx), that featured sizable anarchist contingents alongside state-aspiring socialists. Clashes between Marx and Bakunin over the state's role in anti-capitalist struggle culminated in the International's schism. The Paris Commune, occurring one year prior, exemplifies the role of memory in left historiography: anarchists remember the Commune as a popular uprising reflecting many anarchist principles, while other socialists recall the Commune as disorganized and unable to defend itself (while also downplaying anarchism's role and Proudhonism).

Finn engages with mainstream narratives about classic anarchism—'terrorism' and assassination – by observing that anarchists engaged in two forms of propaganda: via the deed and the word. Most anarchist activity emphasized the latter: publishing, journalism, and translation work. International networks spread news globally – texts and words meant to explain anarchist critiques of capitalism and the state, and thus inspire the masses to revolt. Yet such revolt was perceived to require force, and thus some anarchists engaged in targeted acts of violence against notorious public figures (e.g., heads-of-state, police, or industrialists). This 'propaganda of the deed' also intended to inspire workers to revolt through militant actions against those who sowed so much misery – upon the world's proletariat and poor, via political repression, militarism, and labor exploitation – yet seemed unstoppable. Interpreting anarchism via the deed and word, demonstrates that anarchists viewed their philosophy as an inspirational idea and movement.

While Marxism's role in socialism's pre-WWI history has often been exaggerated by Left historians and academics, the Soviet Union posed a considerable organizing, ideological, and repressive challenge to anarchism after WWI. This impact is shown in Finn's two primary European case studies: Russia and Spain. These historical examples are important to contemporary anarchists – not just because they involve examples of mass mobilizations around an anarchist cause, but because they illustrate successful organization and possible alternatives (i.e., actually-existing anarchism). They also illuminate practical conflicts between anarchism and Marxism in practice: both revolutions saw anarchists repressed by Marx's state-seeking acolytes, a critical lesson that later generations of anarchists internalized. Anarchists disagreed with using the state apparatus to guide popular sentiment or direct these revolutions. The Bolsheviks in Russia and the Stalinist International Brigades were uneasy with the popular appeal of anarchist thought, supplanted organically-created structures (like worker soviets) with their own statist organizations, and sought to militarily subjugate anarchist and other independent leftwing forces.

Debating Anarchism continues anarchist studies' decolonizing trend, acknowledging anarchism's worldwide reach. Activists outside Europe adapted anarchism to their own 'local idioms'. Global anarchisms grew in dialogue within internationalist networks. Although Finn does not attempt to catalogue where anarchism existed or thrived, he does present noteworthy examples outside Europe. For example, Indian anarchists used a diversity of strategies during their anti-colonial struggle. Further east in Asia, cross-fertilization spread anarchist ideas throughout China, Japan, and Korea. For the latter, Finn claims the movement was small, but influential; he mentions the Korean anarcho-communist-led Shinmin commune within Manchuria, but doesn't dwell on its importance. The history of the Korean People's Association in Manchuria, who controlled an autonomous zone along the Korean border, is an important story in anarchism's interwar years; Finn's desire to de-Europeanize anarchist historiography could have been strengthened by a greater elaboration on this movement's successes (and failures).

Finally, Finn explores anarchism's second, contemporary wave. Following WWII, the Cold War and various red scares – alongside Marxist and Soviet hegemony – anarchism was forced to reconfigure itself, re-styling for a new era. Anti-colonial movements' influence upon the New Left – and thus contemporary anarchism, too – were crucial. Anarchism further embraced anti-authoritarianism, with multiple 'new anarchisms' created in-tandem with other movements, such as Black anarchism, anarcha-feminism, and eco-anarchism. These broader, more diffused anarchisms had a considerable influence upon popular movements, including the global justice movement and the occupy/plaza movements of the early-2010s.

As an introduction to anarchist ideas, Finn's work is solid. However, where this book really excels is as a more advanced analysis addressing prominent past misunderstandings, while also drawing out new trends in anarchist studies. Consequently, *Debating Anarchism* explains how anarchism changed and adapted to new global circumstances, and emphasizes how ideas influenced each new anarchist generation. Thus, Finn achieves his goal: helping readers to accurately interrogate a deeply misunderstood movement.

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