

Global Anarchism and Asia

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Outline of a presentation given at the International Symposium "Global Anarchism: Past, Present and Future. For Connecting Asia to the World" in Tokyo, Japan, November 16, 2013.

Overview

The presentation will be divided into into four parts:

1. Comments on the state of contemporary anarchism in general
2. Comments on anarchism as a global movement
3. Comments on the specific role of Asia in the context of contemporary global anarchism
4. Comments on the challenges for advancing anarchism globally

In each part, I will present a number of theses.

1. Comments on the state of contemporary anarchism in general

a) The anarchist movement has experienced a strong global resurgence since the late 1990s.

b) The contemporary anarchist movement is only partially inspired by historical anarchism. More recent sources of inspiration are the anti-bourgeois protest movements of the late 1960s, various social movements of the past decades (among them feminist, queer, ecological, and animal rights movements), a strong sense of anti-authoritarian and horizontal organizing following the collapse of the Soviet Union, punk/hardcore subculture, and post-colonial Third World movements such as the Zapatistas or the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil.

c) These developments have often led to conflicts between "class struggle anarchists" and "new anarchists", or, in the terms of David Graeber, between "big-A anarchists" and "small-a anarchists".

d) The resurgence of the anarchist movement has contributed to lively activist and academic debate on anarchism as well as to numerous projects (Food Not Bombs, No One Is Illegal, a worldwide network of infoshops, etc.) and social movements (anti-austerity campaigns, occupations, etc.) largely inspired by anarchist principles, but not to a significant weakening of the state system and global capitalism.

This is, in my opinion, the framework in which discussions about contemporary anarchism must be situated.

2. Comments on anarchism as a global movement

Anarchism has often been perceived and criticized as a "Western" movement, because its best-known proponents (Bakunin, Kropotkin, Most, Malatesta, and others) developed their theories in the context of social developments in Europe and North America. There are several possible answers to this perception and critique:

a) It is accurate and therefore anarchism must be rejected from an anti-Eurocentric perspective.

b) It is accurate and therefore the anarchist movement must consciously attempt to shed its Western legacy.

c) It is accurate when we speak of the self-identified anarchist movement, but there have always been plenty of traditions of anti-authoritarian politics outside of the Western world, which anarchism today should align itself with.

d) It is not accurate, because anarchism spread very early on to non-Western regions where it became a significant force in revolutionary politics (in particular, in Latin America, East Asia, and Northern and Southern Africa).

e) It is not accurate, because anarchism did not only spread to non-Western regions early on, but was also influenced by social developments there.

I think it is very important to address and discuss these questions, as the possibilities we see for global anarchism today are largely dependent on how we answer them.

3. Comments on the specific role of Asia in the context of contemporary global anarchism

a) In the past decade, strong claims have been made about the unacknowledged importance of anarchism for revolutionary politics in China, Korea, and Japan in the early twentieth century. More research and more collaboration between "Western" and "Eastern" scholars is needed to sharpen our understanding of this historical period.

b) The recent rise of anarchism in Asia extends beyond China, Korea, and Japan; in particular, it includes strong anarchist movements in the Philippines and Indonesia. The contemporary anarchist movement in Asia often strongly resembles "small-a anarchism", but we also see significant interest in anarchist history.

4. Comments on the challenges for advancing anarchism globally

a) In order to enable anarchist communication globally, some very practical questions need to be tackled, namely language, funds, and the use of new communication technology, especially the Internet.

b) It is impossible to talk about global anarchist alliances without discussing the role of local and regional alliances and their relationship to global ones.

c) We need to discuss models of global alliances. Is there any possibility to go beyond informal networks? If so, how? Would it violate anarchist principles if formal/organizational alliances were established?

d) We need to discuss the question of how important it is to label global anti-authoritarian networks as "anarchist". Does this strengthen anarchist politics or rather inhibit them?

e) Especially if we deem the usage of the label "anarchism" important, we need to clarify how we use the term/what kind of anarchism we are talking about.

f) In order to create a basis for fruitful communication across national borders, the history of imperialism, colonialism, and racism needs to be taken into account and discussed in anarchist communities.

g) Given the history of imperialism and colonialism, the question of nationalism and the emergence of nation states in different regions must be discussed, as the historical and political contexts of the discussion differ vastly from region to region.

h) No emancipatory global anarchist movement can be created if questions of economic injustice within the movement aren't addressed, as difficult and, at times, painful as it may be.

Conclusion

A global anarchist movement carries enormous potential and is a necessity for effective global resistance against the state system and capitalism. There are many obstacles to developing a strong global anarchist movement (language barriers, lack of funds, the legacy of imperialism and colonialism, global social injustice), but believing that they can be overcome in a concerted effort by anarchists from all over the world is a central part of the anarchist vision. It is up to us to make this happen. Conferences like these are an important contribution.