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confessions of an awkward pupil
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When the KSL issued our first publication, George Cores' "Personal Recollections of the Anarchist Past" in 1992 there really was a shortage of good, accurate and informative books, articles or pamphlets about the history of anarchism. The works of Paul Avrich were the gold standard – exhaustively researched and reliable – and other occasional gems shone out of the pile. Some of the available material, though, was disturbingly erroneous and we have to put that down partly to a lack of primary material that led authors to make strange assumptions about people and their ideas. Within twenty odd years, matters had changed beyond recognition. In 1992 I had read more or less every book and pamphlet on the history of anarchism. Now there has been a relative explosion in the material available. Books, pamphlets, articles and blog posts are appearing constantly and, in a rather comforting way, it is impossible to read them all – especially the latter, and this is not even taking into account the once rare and inaccessible newspapers and pamphlets that are now available to read on line as well as the digitization of letters and pamphlets that, once, one would have had to travel the world to see.

Why is that? Why the recent flood? Well I do remember Albert Meltzer speaking of academic research muttering grimly "When the buggers have finished with Marxism they'll start on us" but I'd like to think that there is in all of that a growing genuine interest in what anarchism is, how it developed and what influences it had on the world about us. Anarchists themselves are keen to preserve and display their own history and they are keen for others to have access to it. I find it especially interesting because a while ago I entered history myself. For a while a spate of students, mainly, were looking to interview me about the anarchist actions and movements I had been involved in. I have to say it was a little flattering, at first. I'd never seen myself particularly important (I'd always put the stamps on the envelopes and book the meeting rooms etc) but perhaps I really was a player – even if many of the questions were if I knew so and so and what were they like. It got all a little disturbing though. They knew more about me than I did. They'd quote a flier I'd written here, a meeting I had spoken at there – none of which I could remember with any clarity at all. I began to worry that I wasn't giving them the answers they wanted. They were often like kindly teachers trying to lead the awkward pupil to the correct response. One young man in particular was very concerned about my casual statement that much of what I had written was not exactingly thought out but intuitive and often a space filler so we could have the paper ready for printing the next day, and I couldn't even remember the pseudonym I'd used to write it. Reluctantly I ended these relationships. We weren't going anywhere. I knew it would end in tears so I had to walk away.

A free man, left to my books and memories, the world took on a very late summer glow. I basked in the sun of age, gave a few talks thinking I had advice to offer the young ones (in retrospect I had fuck all worth saying) and then packed up the bags and retreated into history. When I surfaced I began to read, for pleasure, some new publications – blog posts, books/ theses whatever, about events I had been part of, and papers I had helped produce. The

problem was that I really couldn't really recognize what was being written about. It wasn't as I remembered and it didn't feel at all like they said it did. There were probably good reasons for that – not least some of us not being interviewed, and our grouping/ publication/ support group probably not being considered as particularly important by the writer. After all you can't cover everything, can you? Any historian has to have some priorities. I shrugged the shoulders and went back to obscure anarchists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. To be honest that was giving me enough problems. Something, though, wouldn't settle and I couldn't let it lie. If I couldn't recognize in these "histories" the movements and activities I had been part of what could that suggest about all the histories of other places, people and periods that were being produced?

What I think we have been doing in the field of anarchist history during the last twenty or so years is the job John Locke described philosophers as doing. We have been under-labourers in the garden of knowledge. We have been clearing the rubble from the garden of history to find the patterns beneath it and letting others plant it. The rubble has been the rubble of time and the rubble of previous writers, many of whom lacked the access to this flood of primary material mentioned earlier, or were simply distorted by their own prejudices as to what anarchists were and anarchism was. And clearing away the rubble is no easy task. It's often lonely work, sometimes maddeningly pedantic and demanding a patience and relentlessness that can be quite exhausting. Of course when we clear the rubble we put piles of it behind the garden shed or next to the garden wall and these piles can create problems of their own, but there can be no doubt that some fine and exciting work, in the tradition of Paul Avrich, has taken place within this context. We have had to re-think what we thought we knew about our ideal; we have had our eyes opened to the substantial presence of anarchists and anarchism in countries where we had originally thought they had the most minimal of traces. Our understanding of what

we might call "prominent figures" has grown, revealing them as far more complex people than we previously thought. In some cases we have been able to see more clearly the anarchist milieu they were part of and consequently have been able to chart some of the social, personal and political dynamics of that milieu and how it may have shaped their writing.

There is now, also, a far more common presumption that anarchism was more than these prominent voices. Thanks to recent work we can see more of "the unknowns", those whose efforts kept anarchism alive in desperate times, those who struck back at capitalism in all its forms, those who argued in the workplace, the rent resistance group, the literary society, the pubs etc for what they believed in. Those who put out the chairs and sold the papers. These are tantalizing glimpses of people who, ten years ago, we knew nothing about and this has opened exciting new routes of research and reflection. Finally, of course this recent research has demanded of us that we interrogate the historical narrative of anarchism that has been generally accepted both by academia and, in many cases, anarchists themselves. How anarchism developed, when and where, and what it actually was, continue to be up for discussion, and consideration. At the very least we can now sense that "anarchism" did not float untouched by humanity in the blue sky of philosophy and was simply the product of fine, or quirky, minds but, rather, something that was constantly being interrogated, assessed and refined by the practice of many people. Sometimes very good anarchist history can isolate for us just where in that spectrum of interrogation anarchism was during a certain period. It doesn't hurt us, also, to realize that "history" is the actions, or non-actions of men and women rather than something imperial and mysterious with its laws of stately movement.

As more and more information comes to light we see works, then, that are regularly looking at history to provide some type of answer to the question of what anarchism is, or at the least some understanding of what it was. Some anarchists have posi-

Agustin Guillamon,[1] for instance, that has allowed us to see the central importance of the CNT-FAI Defense Committees on July 19 1936 and, between them, have almost obliterated the rather romantic idea of how wonderfully spontaneous Spanish anarchist practice was. These Committees were both actively involved in the communities where they lived and also busy planning for the revolution they were looking to bring about. When it came they could both challenge the army and put into place structures that kept working class communities supplied with food and materials. Both writers have also reflected on, and explored the nature of, the tensions within the CNT. Using the hastily scrawled minutes of locals and other sources they portray the fierce and confused opposition to some of the positions of the CNT Higher Committees while still being shackled by a loyalty to an organization that meant so much to them both in the past and in their present. Such emotional commitment meant that many *cenetistas* could have their feet in more than one of the many, many tendencies that swirled around in the organization – some of which we are still grappling to understand.

Whatever we extrapolate from all of this though, we are learning, I hope, to respect the ideas of our historical comrades and are making sure we do not see them as simple, one dimensional or lacking our intelligence and political sophistication. Even if they were not what once we thought they were, or really wanted them to be, we can try and see their world through their eyes and not through our own.

Barry Pateman

Notes

[1] *Anarchism and the City: Revolution and Counter-revolution in Barcelona, 1898–1937* by Chris Ealham. AK Press, 2010; *Ready for Revolution : The CNT Defense Committees in Barcelona, 1933-1938* by Agustín Guillamón. AK Press and Kate Sharpley Library: 2014.

tioned themselves as inheritors of a certain type of anarchism (the real one, of course) and look to justify their present positions in the light of a rather careful selection from anarchist history. It's an attractive strategy. It can mean the end of those tedious discussions about "What is Anarchism?" – discussions that appear to have taken much of our lives and led us both to spend far more time talking and arguing with each other, rather than anyone else, and have become a constant series of relentless mutterings that tend to obscure rather than clarify. We have the answer and if we sometimes smooth out the rough edges of the past we can justify it as helping push forward towards anarchy now. Looking back over my life I think I have done that rather too much. That said, I don't think historians, however anarchist they are, should ever do this. The rough edges of anarchism, as well as the apparently smooth and straightforward areas, should be their territory; the contradictions that initially puzzle and the anomalies that are too worrying to ignore. Historians should be the irritatingly sober person at the party warning you not to get too pissed on the historical correctness of your ideas. The awkward truth is that mining seams of anarchist history purely in the light of our own present pre-occupations is at best ahistorical and at worst potentially dangerous for the movement. Such methodologies can easily dismiss the complexities of anarchism in favour of comforting and rather one-dimensional interpretations. They can just as easily lead us to draw wrong conclusions about what we are doing now and how we go forward because we may have drawn erroneous or simplistic conclusions about both what people believed and how their actions reflected that belief. Perhaps there is considerably more rubble to be cleared before we become too presumptuous about planting the garden.

The opposite of this approach is the rather common tendency of each generation of new anarchists to believe that their experience is unprecedented and all that has gone before is largely irrelevant. Somehow, nothing really existed before us and all that matters is now. Of course there were a few comrades who were very prescient

but really instead of thinking about history we should be doing stuff today. Circumstances have changed so much and the past is irrelevant. Both positions have an uncomfortable arrogance about them (even if it is not deliberate). In essence; the lived experiences of anarchists from the past are either irrelevant full stop, or only important if they were lived as we want them to have been lived. Not caring about the past at all or searching for only a particular strand of the movement imply little respect towards the richness of what anarchists believed and who they were. It also can lead to either the repetitious and relentless repeating of myth after myth that results in the usual sulky, or aggressive, response when they are challenged or re-inventing the wheel of errors time and time again, presumably in the hope that this time we'll get it right. I hope that the work now being produced has a salutary effect on both positions.

All that said there is a welcoming lessening of hagiography with regard to anarchists and anarchism in most of the new material that is appearing. I rather think that the hagiographic assessments that were produced in the past may well have been an understandable reaction to the vilification anarchists have received from all sides and the creation or re-discovery of heroes and heroines was a necessary stage in how we responded to our own history. We have gone beyond that now and presented fuller and more complex picture of ideas, movements and people. We have also been able to look at earlier anarchists with far more realism. It doesn't hurt us to know that Adolph Fischer and George Engels had not spoken to Albert Parsons and August Spies for a year before their arrests and were angry at what they saw as the latter's move to reformism within the struggles of the Chicago Labour Movement. To see them all as the "Haymarket Martrys" may be a wonderfully shorthand and iconic symbolism. To realize the political differences and tensions between them pays respect to who they were (not who we made them to be).

Perhaps the most fascinating result of this recent research is the discovery of how complex anarchism was when interpreted and experienced by many earlier comrades. One example may help here. Billy MacQueen was an extraordinarily brave and committed class struggle anarchist. Sympathetic to the ideas of Johann Most, with whom he was in regular correspondence, MacQueen would go on pay a grim price for his anarchist beliefs, which we might roughly summarize as the primacy of working class struggle, the importance of industrial action in bringing about anarchy and a fierce anti-religiousness. The paper he helped edit called *The Free Commune*, though, had space for the Christian anarchism of John C. Kenworthy and cheerfully advertised the individualist paper "The Eagle and the Serpent." (sent to it by Max Nettlau) in its third edition in 1899 – all this while mocking the sentimental and hypocritical responses of "reformers" to the assassination of the Empress Elisabeth of Austria by Italian anarchist Luigi Luccheni in September 1898. These sorts of apparent contradictions are not isolated examples. We can see them in Chris Ealham's portrayal of young CNT-FAI members reading Kropotkin and Stirner while being profoundly influenced by both, or the refusal of unquestionably brave militants of the IWW to refuse to allow Emma Goldman to speak on birth control in their hall. Quite what this all means will provide fertile ground for further work. We might hazard a guess that a present tendency we can see for absolute ideological purity in anarchism was not, in the past, as common as we may have thought and when it was present it was not a particularly pretty sight. Remember that anarchists have killed each other because of it.

Of course all this complexity being discovered does change the historical narrative of anarchism with regard to individuals, organizations and tendencies. It challenges the adjudication of importance based on our own pre-occupations and allows for all kinds of re-assessment. We might cite the works of Chris Ealham and