An anarchist guide to ... Europe

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What do anarchists have to say about Europe? The answer is nothing that speaks directly to the recent, tedious and crudely self-serving debates about the European Union and the rights and wrongs of membership, but quite a lot about some of the issues that have animated these clashes: trade, democracy, movements of peoples, nationality, principles of justice and well-being. There are three major lines of thought, each extending from a critique of European state practice, which together support an alternative vision of organising. The first is about anarchy and the United States of Europe. The second is about European imperialism. The third is about Europeanisation.

The United States of Europe

In the light of Chomsky's exposures of the corruption of republican ideas under the influence of finance capital, it seems odd to find that an anarchist – Bakunin, no less – spoke warmly about the United States of America and the prospect of a United States of Europe. What on earth did he mean?

Bakunin represented America as a model for a federal Europe. The American federal system, he argued, reflected a popular desire for self-government. Having fought a revolutionary war, American citizens were keen to secure themselves from the tyranny of monarchism and colonialism. The decision to unite as federal units was an expression of their aspiration for freedom.

Bakunin was under no illusion about the character of American revolutionary aspirations or the interests that prevailed when they were given institutional expression. It was no accident that the defence of federalism was more pronounced in the South than it was in the North or that the demand to be rid of tyranny was measured by the latitude individuals enjoyed to exercise their mastership over others: federalism was entirely compatible with slavery and, later anarchists added, systematic violence against indigenous peoples. Federalism also provided a foundation for the normalisation of wage slavery, though Bakunin considered that the class divisions that were so evident in Europe were less pronounced in 1860s America.

Making up for the shortcomings of the American model, Bakunin imagined that the United States of Europe would socialise property and anarchise governance. This conception of a federal system fuelled the revolutionary ambitions that eventually found expression in 1871, in the Paris Commune. Though the Commune was brutally crushed, it highlighted the difference between the idea of United States of Europe and the reality of United States of America. The latter was merely a federative state: a system that united territorialised, sovereign units, limiting their spheres of action by the imposition of a constitution that was protected by a central authority. Bakunin's comrade James Guillaume noticed that in a federal state, individual units were forbidden from leaving the federation, even forbidden from subdividing to form new, separate units. What was forbidden was not impossible – but illegal and thus fixed and constrained by constitutional law (or treaty). Stretching revolutionary principles of self-government, the peoples of the United States of Europe would not only abandon individual property rights but also pursue Proudhonian principles of free agreement to de-territorialise decision-making and attack the state. The power of the sovereign, both within and between the constitutive units would be eliminated. Each would rely only on the collective power arising from their federation to protect their constitutional principles and arrangements.
Europe and imperialism

Like most socialists, anarchists decried imperialist adventures in the non-European world and the appropriation of vast tracts of it. Because anarchists didn’t subscribe to theses of progressive historical change, they were also largely immune to the argument that colonialism was a route to capitalist collapse and therefore a justifiable cost of human progress – a view adopted by some Marxists. Colonisation was domination, driven by exploitation and underpinned by assumptions of cultural superiority.

As well as looking at the ways that European domination played out, anarchists also looked at the dynamics of European state formation. The argument was that all states operated in the same way. In hock to banks, elites secured control of local populations through a mixture of force and fraud constructing the state through processes of colonisation and monopoly. However, these processes of formation were not identical and states followed what modern historical sociologists refer to as more-or-less coercive or capitalist-intensive paths. At the absolutist end of the spectrum, elites used overtly repressive techniques to extract resources from majority rural populations and force military service through conscription. At the liberal end, they relied on deals with property owners and the law to achieve the same result from increasingly urban populations. The uneven development of European states explained the competitive nature of the state system and the increasingly top-down nationalistic policies that states pursued in their battles for prestige. In the late nineteenth century, Britain was the dominant imperial power in Europe, but France and Germany continuously jostled for primacy on the continent. The enmity was exposed in the 1870 Franco-Prussian war and again in 1914, in spite of the best efforts of the socialist Second International to broker peace deals and forge European union.

According to this analysis, the early European unity projects which fed into the EEC/EU are based on a fundamental tension. While ‘ever greater union’ normalised capitalist relations, extended liberal representative systems of government and suspended hostilities between major European states, the it also reaffirmed the primacy of states and left mechanisms for European exploitation and domination intact. Bringing former rivals together through elite bargaining, this United States of Europe has no collective power, as Guillaume understood it, but still attracts the loathing of nationalists and patriots who feel aggrieved by the apparent loss of sovereignty and national standing. Union reaffirms the special value of European civilisation by attaching it to ideals of peace, civil liberties, pluralism and democracy, simultaneously reinforcing political and cultural ties with those non-European states that it most resembles and opening up paths to grass-roots cooperation and sharing across the continent and beyond. But it cannot transcend the centrifugal forces active within states which speak nostalgically of the majesty of national traditions, bemoan the dilution of national character and the fetters that Union places on the pursuit of naked self-interest.

Europeanisation

Nineteenth century anarchists didn’t use the language of globalisation to think about the extension of European power in the world, but developed an approach to what was called internationalisation to reflect on the role Europeans had played in developing global interconnections. Like globalisation, internationalisation was used by non-anarchists descriptively to advance normative arguments for the extension of free trade across the globe, on terms that advantaged industrial and manufacturing states. Advocates of internationalisation argued about the extent to which trade could or should be regulated for the sake of general well-being, but there was general agreement that there was no changing the prevailing processes. Naturally, anarchists challenged this claim and offered alternatives based on the global extension of the federal principle. Their vision was genuinely internationalist insofar as it was anti-statist and designed to support solidarities between different ethnic, religious and language groups from the bottom-up.

Anarchists argued that Europeanisation paralleled internationalisation and that it was circular and degenerative process – not linear or progressive as nationalist cultural champions contended. Europe was a hegemon, Élisée Reclus argued. Punching well above its weight in terms of its control of the earth’s resources and its global reach
(to the Americas, Australia, New Zealand) it was the centre of the world, and more extensive than either Greece or Rome had been in the earlier periods. But rather than simply extending European influence in the non-European world, Europeans appropriated ideas from the regions they explored, mapped, colonised and conquered and fed them back under their own cultural banners. Europeans learned a lot in the process. In Egypt, the near East and India, Reclus said, the daughter rediscovered its mother. But Europeanisation undermined the potential to facilitate the sharing of knowledges across the globe. In fact, by supporting internationalisation through Europeanisation, Europeans tainted and corrupted the shared and overlapping values which they re-packaged and attempted to universalise. The end result has been the creation of cultural barriers and the erection of political and trade boundaries designed to protect the achievements, talent and ingenuity of those inside the continent and excluding the dangerous, uncivilised peoples without (unless, of course, they are able to demonstrate that they meet some special designated purpose and are able to demonstrate their respect for British/French/European values).

Camillo Berneri and Colin Ward both pointed to the principle of decentralised federalism as one of the distinctive ideas to emerge from historical anarchism and argued that this horizontal organisational principle was wrapper for a broad critique of the state. The anarchist proposal was built on a novel understanding of the essential instability of the state system, its global structural inequalities and the drivers it created for mass movements of peoples. In this context, it's possible to see that Bakunin's proposal for a United States of Europe was not at all prophetic. It outlined some possibilities for Europe's transformation.