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Transnational Anarchism

This book results from a colloquium held in 2012 that reassessed the national sphere in the field of transnational anarchist studies. It reflects the nationalist backlash we are currently going through and the resulting attempt of labor studies to conciliate internationalism and nationalism, as well as move the focus from structures toward protagonists.[1] It is thus of its time, well written and edited, for it went through two publishing processes, firstly through Palgrave Macmillan and secondly through PM Press.

The essays attempt to refigure the field of anarchist studies in a manner that will surprise many readers. Yet these revisions make sense. In all the enthusiasm for the transnational approach, scholars have forgotten how locally rooted, both at home and abroad, the movement remained. An ever-present internationalist rhetoric coupled with a strong localist agenda does not make the study of the topic any easier, as exemplified by a declaration from the Spanish representative at the 1935 session of the International Workers’ Association (IWA): “We make the revolution at home, copy it; this is our Internationalism.”[2] Meanwhile in Spain, propaganda from the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) and Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI) always carried the International’s acronym as a seal of approval. Thus we are confronted with a bottom-up brand of internationalism, or perhaps a horizontal one, characterized by individual empowerment through collective living. How different from centralized Marxist internationalism.

The editors of the book illustrate the dichotomous character of the movement by quoting anarchist historian Max Nettlau: “You cannot be collectivist without being an individualist nor an internationalist without being a cultural nationalist” (p. 73). Simply put, what the book refers to as “network-based advocacy networks and their individuals” or “informal internationalism that disdains centralization” does not really fit with transnational studies and classical social movement theory (p. 160). And this is precisely why Constance Bantman, the main editor, has come to the conclusion that anarchism provides “an excellent testing ground to examine all factors running against transnationalizing and internationalizing tendencies” (p. 175). Here it bears mentioning the contrast with her previous publications which belong to a historiography that depicts the Belle époque as the highlight of transnational anarchism.[3] Perhaps realizing she was trying to square a circle, Bantman opted for Dieter Nelles’s outlook (a contributor to her 2010 book) on anarchist internationalism, that is, much about nothing. If so, this brings a further conceptual problem as anarchism fits with neither methodological nationalism nor transnationalism.

To justify the objective of this current book, which is reassessing the national sphere, Bantman and Bert Altena remind us that the Belle époque is also referred to as “the age of nationalisms” and that there is no reason to
believe anarchists were shielded from this context. One of the book’s contributors, Ruth Kinna, writes that the objective is pinpointing “the tension between the enduring pull of national loyalty and the principled commitment to international ideas” (p. 45). A broader aim, as external scholars put it, concerns widening the scope of anarchist theory through the use of social and cultural history in order to shed more light on the emergence and dissemination of anarchist ideas through networks and agents.[4]

Regarding methodology and sources, the contributors draw mainly on migration studies and cultural production, especially from the anarchists who were part of the Italian diaspora. The stories of these agents are usually well contextualized transnationally, sometimes at the expense of the national and local reassessment—the main goal. On the semantic level, the term “cosmopolitan” is favored to “internationalism” and “transnationalism” for they are respectively associated with Marxism and the “state.” The anarchist cosmopolitanism phenomenon is thus reduced to “a paradigm against the constricting allegiance of religion, class, and the state” (p. 15). Such a paradigm also carries a local or urban flavor according to Carl Levy’s definition of “safe cosmopolitan cities of refuge for the exile networks.”[5] Regarding the structure of this collective work, the contributions are divided into four parts: the introduction, where the editors position themselves around transnational studies and theorize the analysis of network-based social movements; the second part, which regroups contributions that tackle theories of the nation, the state, and internationalism; the third part, which regards transnational identities and practices of the diasporas; and the last part on the importance of the local-national sphere. Each contribution varies in its respect to the editors’ guidelines, which, as a reminder, amount to highlighting the significance of the local and national spheres, namely, through individual stories of anarchist exiles and migrants.

David Turcato explores the extent to which the nation-state can be reconciled with anarchism. Firstly, he contrasts the political state with the cultural nation, the latter being a political-coercive-exclusive entity, and the other a cultural-free-open community of the people. He then demonstrates how Mikhail Bakunin and Piotr Kropotkin defended the right to self-determination for Polish, Slavic, and Finnish communities, but not as centralized states. As anarchists, they distinguished the nation from the state.

The second part of Turcato’s essay on national identity and anarchist practice brings us to Argentina. There, Errico Malatesta, along with others from the diaspora, produced their propaganda in Italian, addressing topics related to their country of origin. “This in no way hindered their fundamental contribution to the establishment of the influential Federación Obrera Regional Argentina (FORA). Hence, they succeeded in transplanting their peculiar brand of anarchism into another national context. A similar phenomenon was found elsewhere, despite the lesser presence of Latin-speaking migrants and exiles. According to Turcato, this demonstrates how their struggle “crossed national boundaries at the same time as it remained focused on struggles of national scope” (p. 40). On a semantic level, the author prefers referring to cross-nationalism rather than transnationalism.

According to Ruth Kinna, Kropotkin did not necessarily discard the nation-state. His views were not “transnational” in the sense that he believed in “national variations” and “cross-cultural practices leading to a distinct cosmopolitan community” (p. 45). In her words, transnational studies depict a centrifugal relation going from the non-state network to the centralized state, whereas Kropotkin believed this relation to be centripetal and consequently remained wary of state-related initiatives and internationally organized labor. But what to make of his support for national defense during the First World War through the Manifesto of the Sixteen? This is best explained, on the one hand, by an opposition to Prussian militarism that allegedly endangered the remnants of the Renaissance legacy of city-states (like mutualism), and on the other, by a desire to see old empires collapse and open the way to antistate federations, especially in the Balkans. Yet the end result was rather disappointing: the Manifesto of the Sixteen opened a gap between anarchist theory and praxis (Kropotkin versus Malatesta) in the context of wartime and postwar state repression and the ever-growing socialist and communist challenges, leading ultimately to a loss of steam at the end of the 1920s.

Altena evokes how anarchist historian and linguist Max Nettlau considered that anarchism stemmed from linguistic communities—the nation—that he contrasted with the state. This dichotomy is best found in the Austro-Hungarian empire Nettlau grew up in and that tinted his beliefs, namely, through a certain Slavophobia that nourished his pan-Germanism. This becomes obvious in the postwar period when he disapproved of the Versailles settlement’s granting of South Tyrol to Italy as well as other advantages to Slavic minorities.
Indians like Har Dayal campaigned against colonialism and helped establish the anarchist movement. East Asia was returning to Japan with suitcases full of propaganda. Shusui or Iwasa Sakutaro remained in San Francisco, because immigration was happening. Such militants as Kotoku Magon. At about the same time, a short-lived Japanese anarchist culture that he contextualizes nationally and internationally. San Francisco was already governed by anarchist internationalism, resulting in hybridization (p. 92).

Kenyon Zimmer sheds light on early twentieth-century San Francisco, then a multiethnic hub of anarchist culture that he contextualizes nationally and transnationally. San Francisco was already governed by the skilled workers’ Union Labor Party when the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) chapter was established and affiliated the left outs, namely, Latin and Asian unskilled laborers deemed “unorganizable.” Predominant in the Bay Area’s anarchist movement were such Italians as Eugene Travaglio, who was converted to anarchism while traveling in Manchuria. Then came the Mexican Revolution and the IWW volunteers who fought alongside the Partido Liberal Mexicano of Ricardo Flores Magon. At about the same time, a short-lived Japanese immigration was happening. Such militants as Kotoku Shusui or Iwasa Sakutaro remained in San Francisco, before returning to Japan with suitcases full of propaganda and helped establish the anarchist movement there. East Indians like Har Dayal campaigned against colonialism on two continents, up until the 1917-18 Hindu Conspiracy Trials. The harsh wartime and postwar repression brought about the proscription of the IWW and further limitations on Asian immigration. Yet the movement persisted due to the Italians’ stubbornness, the creation of the International Group, and the eventual setting up of Gruppo Emanzipazione that fought in the CNT ranks during the Spanish Civil War.

In his closing remarks, Zimmer points out that activists fought at home and abroad “for a patria with neither borders nor bastards.” He believes historians of anarchism should be the “bastards of national historiographies by transgressing the borders of the same nation-state against which their subjects of study declared war” (p. 114). This remark, as well as several others throughout the chapter, sounds out of tune with the editors’ primary goal of reassessing the role of the national in the transnational.

Pietro di Paola tells us about London’s Italian expat scene of ten thousand people in the late nineteenth century. He depicts the intermingling of Italian anarchists with Mazzinians, Paris’ Commune veterans, Russian ex-pats like Bakunin, and other foreigners who joined hands with the British militants to establish the 1876 Anarchist International (IWA). Di Paola notes that the Italian exiles were usually politicized before crossing the Channel. He also points out how most of their British-based press and pamphlets remained in Italian, thus questioning their internationalism or perhaps reflecting the hard time penetrating a non-Latin insular society. Interestingly, the propaganda found its way back to Italy, and this, according to the contributor, deserves a thorough “translocal” study. He also wishes that relations with British anarchists be further explored, as he mentions a fundamental difference: the exiles’ fascination with this stable and liberal parliamentary monarchy and their desire not to spoil a sanctuary from continental repression, views that British militants did not share or understand. Yet this did not prevent the two sides from jointly campaigning to prevent the deportation from the United Kingdom of Malatesta or opposing Francisco Ferrer’s condemnation to death in the wake of Spain’s Tragic Week in 1909. In conclusion, the author stresses the need for more transnational studies of such topics, hence advocating the very field of study that the editors are trying to reassess.

Raymond Craib focuses on a barely known Chilean militant whose efficiency was allegedly worth a hundred prominent anarchists like Malatesta. Casimiro Barrios migrated from Spain as a teenager and converted to an-
archism during his hard-working experiences in the nitrates mines. He later involved himself, along fellow shopkeepers, in Santiago’s lively Barrio Latino, where he advocated social reforms as a member of the Socialist Party. Yet he preferred being called a free thinker, or what Craib refers to as a “sedentary anarchist,” as he had no intention of going anywhere else. The author further points out how the authorities, after frequently arresting him, did not really know how to handle his case, considering especially that he was married to a Chilean national. This did not prevent him from being expelled on several occasions to neighboring Peru, nor sneaking back each time to Chile. Craib definitely provides the most locally focused chapter of this book. Yet he refrains from condemning the transnational method he finds useful in undermining the nation-state. Hence, a broader contextualization of Barrios’s network would have been appreciated.

The late Nino Khünis’s short and efficient contribu-
tion faithfully follows the editors’ guidelines, with the exception of his prioritization of networks over individuals. Using extensive jargon from his discipline, for example, “the negative hypergood imparting the fatherland concept” (p. 162), he demonstrates how Swiss national symbolism played a fundamental role in anarchist collective identity, namely, through nationalistic recuperation or appropriation of traditions and symbols. He cites as examples the principle of localist confederation, a love of freedom that was combined with ideas of national self-determination and resistance against invaders, and a comparison of jailed activists with national hero William Tell.

Bantman condemns the “bourgeois” and “class-
limited” transnational approach that misses the point of “historical realities,” without ever fully defining these terms for our benefit. Evoking Patricia Clavin, Bantman discusses the French militants who accepted borders as tangible realities. Accordingly, internationalist sentiment in the Belle époque coexisted with xenophobia and patriotism.

Regarding xenophobia, Louise Michel, a well-known personage and icon from the Paris Commune, refused to side with Émile Zola during the Dreyfus Affair. This might have been related to the funds she received from former boulangiste turned anti-Semite, Henry de Rochefort. Another Commune veteran who benefited from de Rochefort’s financial help was Charles Malato. Yet he finally joined the pro-Dreyfus side after vacillating for a year. Meanwhile, Émile Pouget repeatedly expressed anti-Semitic prejudices through his newspaper, depicting Dreyfus as a military officer from a wealthy background who need not be defended by the proletariat.

Regarding patriotism, the Great War forced issues of patriotism and national defense to the fore. Breaking the internationalist taboo, Kropotkin supported the Allies and convinced Jean Grave, the editor of the prestigious newspaper Temps Nouveaux, to sign his pro-Allied Manifesto of the Sixteen. Malato was easily convinced, as he even tried to enlist despite his age, and ultimately suggested establishing national militias.

Martin Baxmayer describes how the CNT-FAI resorted to national defense during the Spanish Civil War, especially after centralization prevailed starting in May 1937. This resulted in the sole known example of an anarchist movement joining a government and its armed forces. We find the origins of this move in the rapprochements between the anarcho-nationalist faction of Salvador Canovas with the moderate faction of Juan and Federica Montseny. During the civil war, they both advocated that the CNT postpone revolutionary activities for the sake of national unity and military victory. Baxmayer provides several examples of this “reactive nationalism,” or what Khünis previously referred to as “nationalistic recuperation.” Baxmayer establishes, for example, a parallel between Franco’s Morrocan soldiers and the North African Moor occupiers of the Middle Ages, and mentions a poem from Felix Paredes that refers to the “race” and “blood” inherited from “mother Spain.” Regarding the transnational sphere, we saw at the inception of this review how nationalism (or localism) could prevail within the IWA. Baxmayer makes a further point by arguing that the CNT-FAI’s creation of its Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista relief fund aimed at undermining the influence of radical foreigners in the CNT’s international department. In my view, Baxmayer best illustrates the editors’ objective of reassessing the national in the transnational field, especially when he mentions the hombre complete (complete man) conception that fostered bottom-up development—from the individual to the confederation—which is at odds with the centralized internationalism of the Marxists. Perhaps this should have been central to the editors’ analysis.

Overall, the book’s critique of the transnational buzz through a reassessment of the local/national sphere is a bit inconsistent, considering that several contributors advocate more transnationalism. Thus the black cat on the cover hisses but barely bites and scratches. The focus on migration and exile in the new haven can seem contra-
dictory when constant references are made to transnational networks. There is also the postmodern focus on the protagonist-hero, a reaction against a modernist historiography that has long privileged structures over individuals. Ironically, this contradicts the contemporary anarchist movement’s condemnation of postmodernism as a brand of hyperindividualism stemming out of consumerism.

The sometimes harsh criticisms of the transnational, cross-national, and international approaches are all aimed at an implicit goal of the book to widen the scope of anarchist studies through the inclusion of other spheres of investigation, like the local, the social, and the cultural, in order to better reveal the existence of network-based advocacy structures. This might have been stated more clearly, as the book really succeeds in this matter, even if its explicit aim of questioning transnationalism through a reassessment of the national sphere is not always as successful. The absence of a concluding essay for the volume is a minor drawback, considering the overall strength and scope of the introduction. This is a matter for further consideration, along with a fuller discussion and contextualization regarding anarchist, post-anarchist, and cosmopolitan theoretical fields. Last but not least, the endnotes are not fully inclusive of sources.

In conclusion, this is a useful book for specialists within transnational studies. It provides excellent insights into protagonists and their horizontal networks, as well as further defining a total approach that aims to link the individual to local, national, and transnational spheres of activity, both formal and informal, and at home or in exile—that portmanteau of global and local now referred to as the glocal.

Notes


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