

The spirit of Zomia and Anarchist Initiatives in the Archipelago

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Recently, we had a guest from Philippines in Hamburg, who presented reflections on stateless Southeast Asian communities, alternatives to state-centred history-writing and recent anarchist collectives and initiatives in the Archipelago region.

The presentation started with an overview of anarchist history writing, as it is seen by local activists as an important step towards liberation of society. Meanwhile huge parts of peoples history is not state-based especially in southeast asia, the history writing is mainly state-centred and therefor systematically exclude all forms of communities and identities, who do not work in such categories.

In the presentation, James Scott from Yale University was cited from his book “the art of not being governed – an anarchist history of upland southeast asia” with the argument, that the non governed people of the uplands, the people of so called Zomia area in Southeast Asia are not mentioned in any state-centralised history writing. “In a truly even-handed chronology of precolonial, mainland Southeast Asia, most of the pages would be blank.” Related to the concept of Zomia he says “Politically, Zomia’s hill populations have ~resisted the projects of nation-building and state-making of the states to which it belonged.” This was an interesting point, as it is not really common in european anarchist circles to think about farming cultures and special relations of altitude and culture. And the common picture of “civilisation” is here in western europe that people do not decide voluntarily against “civilisation development” to achieve more autonomy and as our guest said there are people who went and go in the mountains to escape state control and the forced domination of a culture like in colonisation times. The conflict between colonisers and different people and societies they met and attacked and the nation-building in the formerly often non governed regions was described as the following: “State rulers find it impossible to exercise sovereignty over people constantly in motion, with no permanent organisation or allegiances, ephemeral leadership, pliable and fugitive subsistence patterns, and who might shift linguistic practices and ethnic identity”. We heard a lot about differences between the valleys and their stronger assimilation to the ruling system than the highland-people who rather stayed untouched and therefor had a chance to create other social relations than state-centred ones. Pointing out non governed population and its influence is an interesting view on history and present society that leads us to a more complex view and shows relations to anarchist ideas and aims even these people do not see themselves as anarchists.

The next topic was recent anarchist collectives and initiatives. Two infoshops, food not bombs and a project called “mobile anarchist school” and their activities were presented with the help of some pictures. Etniko Bandido infoshop and activity center is an autonomous space created to spread radical consciousness. A place in which alternative resources and information can be found easily and freely. It is also a space for people who wanted to share and discuss different issues and ideas. Further, Etniko Bandido Infoshop is a place for critical and technical thinking against systematic cultured mind-setting. It is a space free for those who wants to hold an activity such as workshops, cooking, film screening, study circles, book clubs, theory discussions, etc.

The second infoshop is named “Kinaiyahan unahon”, which means “nature first”. This is an active anarchist social space in south of the Philippines, Davao City. They have a library that offer different literature and also conduct some workshop and discussion.

There are several food not bombs collectives in different cities in the philippines and campaigns like anti-eviction, against police brutality and others.

The anti-mining is a very special topic in the region which the third part of the presentation was focussing on. The presented cases are attached in a pdf file to this article. All have in common that corporations rob resources, force people to obey to their rules and especially the indigenouse and hill people are affected. German companies are not directly involved, but german banks participate by giving money to mining projects. In the discussion we agreed on the similarities all over the global south with the strategies of corporations and state institutes to enforce capitalism and their benefit against the livelyhood of the regional people affected by poison, technology and violence.

The event was a success and the discussion quite nice, eventhough the presentation material was sometimes too academic for the audience. Related to the practical solutions for us in the global north it is difficult like allways to give answers. So it was inspiring, but also once again a proof for the need of south-south connection rather than north-south to make common struggles visible and networks for united resistance possible.

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