

Anarchism in the Philippines and Transnational Community Building

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My connection to the anarchist movement in the Philippines goes back to a visit to East Asia in 2006. Given the millions of Filipino migrant workers, it was perhaps characteristic that I first made contact with Filipino anarchists not in the Philippines, but in Japan, where they shelled supermarket aisles at night to study throughout the day. When I arrived in Manila a couple of months later, I was welcomed and hosted generously by the local anarchist community. I only stayed for a few weeks, but had the opportunity to meet with various activists. I was very impressed with the networks that had been established and the activists' dedication to the struggle. I have tried to keep updated on the developments in the Philippines since and have remained in contact with some of the people I have met. I have even had the opportunity to collaborate with them on a couple of projects. In this context, I feel honored that I have been asked to contribute to this publication, which is yet another step in what appears to be an ever-expanding movement.

Transnational connections are important for anarchism. They have always been. After all, a key notion of anarchism is its opposition to the nation state. Solidarity across borders and the desire to eventually eradicate these borders are inherent in the anarchist idea.

Unfortunately, there are many obstacles to make this come true. Not only because those in power want to keep us divided — by class, race, gender, and nation — but also because of the international economic barriers that have been established between people in the course of colonial history.

All international separation rests on economic barriers. So-called “cultural barriers” are nothing but pseudo-scientific attempts to justify this. The international separation of communities is created, not “natural”. Maybe there exist cultural differences between people (which is probably a mere matter of definition) — but they don't necessarily create barriers. Each individual is different from each other individual too — and this doesn't necessarily create barriers either. When some people like to eat mashed potatoes and others rice, this hardly creates a problem. What creates a problem is when some people earn \$30 an hour pushing papers and others 20c an hour risking their lives on rickety construction sites. What creates a problem is when some people can go anywhere in the world as they please (both because they can afford to and because they will be issued the required papers), while others can't even travel to the capital city of their home country. What creates a problem is when some people's biggest problem is that their pet dog's favorite food is out of stock, while others are unable to send their kids to school.

It is economic injustice that creates different realities, different perspectives, different priorities, and different expectations. If those in a privileged economic position are not aware of this, their attitudes towards the realities, perspectives, priorities, and expectations of those who do not share their privileged position will inevitably be patronizing, if not outright arrogant and (neo)colonial. Unfortunately, economically privileged folks within the political Left, anarchists included, make no exception here. Leftists in the global North often enough see themselves as enlightened modernists who have to save those in the global South. (Due to a lack of better terms, I will be using “global North” and “global South” in this text as a shorthand for economically privileged and economically less privileged communities in the global context.)

Today, anarchists in the global North hardly ever express such views openly. They have been criticized convincingly enough to be more cautious with the words they choose. This does not always reflect a change in attitude, however. Many discussions of “aid” and “development” still imply the conviction that there is one side that needs help and one side that is able to provide it. Needless to say, this is not exactly a promising basis for global egalitarianism. Arguably, there has been a credible change of attitude in certain radical and anarchist circles of the global North who might have indeed overcome a colonial mindset. They understand not only that it is nothing but economic privilege that puts them in a position where they have something to give, but also that what they have to give is largely reduced to material resources.

Some anarchists, most notably the so-called anarcho-primitivists, reckon that even material aid is no real aid as it only draws people into an allegedly destructive process of civilization. According to anarcho-primitivists, we have to learn from the communities of the so-called “Fourth World”: “primitive” communities who have remained outside nation state control and global capitalism and maintain an allegedly non-alienated lifestyle in harmony with their natural in instincts and their natural environments.

The danger of such a view is that it often perpetuates colonial discourse by doing little more than turning the Eurocentric coin. Romanticizing “the other” as a sort of moral corrective to one's own vices has been part of Eurocentric colonial discourse for centuries: from Rousseau's noble savage to the images of the South Sea paradise to

modern-day esoteric bookstores filled with Celtic, Indian or Tibetan treats of wisdom. Such fantasies only affirm the distance that exists between those who consume these treats and those (the “others”) who disappear behind them.

It seems that today’s single biggest obstacle to helping transcend the barriers of global economic injustice for radicals and anarchists in the global North is the inability to cope with privilege. Guilt has become a driving factor in the way in which many of them approach economically less privileged individuals and communities. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with guilt per se. If it means admitting to one’s own privileges and feeling a personal responsibility for the structural oppression of individuals and communities with less privilege, guilt might be a useful motivational force. An acknowledgment of privilege and an acceptance of responsibility are preconditions for any privileged comrade to work effectively against its perpetuation. However, if guilt means that self-accusation – which is more strongly related to self-pity than many would think — becomes dominant and outweighs the acknowledgment of privilege and the acceptance of responsibility, then our behavior will be marked by insecurity, and not by a fighting spirit. This, in turn, reduces our anti-colonial and anti-racist politics all too often to a mere abstract commitment. We become too afraid to actually engage in community building with people outside of our own social and cultural comfort zone, because we are too afraid of “doing wrong”.

Transnational community building among comrades is the basis for any common struggle against the barriers that keep us divided. The prospects are much less dire than they might appear. Of course, there are many things that have to be taken into account when people with drastically different economic backgrounds engage in community building, and there are many sensitive matters to consider and many lessons to be learned. At the same time, people across all economic (and other) barriers share plenty in their everyday lives and desires: people of all classes and cultures can enjoy a meal together, a football game, a concert, a demonstration. And people of all classes and cultures can (and do!) understand and tolerate verbal or behavioral mishaps of those not familiar with their own social codes as long as basic respect and good will remain obvious. (In fact, the importance that activists from the global North sometimes put on rigorously adapting to the supposed social “rules” of Southern communities often implies the Eurocentric assumption that these communities are incapable of tolerance.)

Transnational anti-colonial community building has to begin with our shared everyday needs and desires. On this plane can we connect, unite, and build alliances. Once alliances have been built, we can tackle the economic differences that divide us and the political structures maintaining them. If we do not engage in transnational community building because we are afraid of doing wrong, then nothing crucial will ever change.

Anti-colonial community building is necessarily a multilateral affair. It cannot be done by a single party alone. It has to involve everyone. Of course it is of utter importance for activists from the global North to refrain from “leading” this process and to listen very carefully to the wants and intentions of their comrades. However, they cannot passively wait for others to single-handedly make the changes either. Unjust economic and social relations can only be turned into just economic and social relations if everyone changes. It will never be possible to turn everyone into masters, and it is hardly desirable to turn everyone into slaves – the goal must be to abolish both the master and the slave.

It seems obvious in which ways those who fight economic injustice can inspire those who profit from it: by educating them about their own lives and needs; by reminding them of patterns of privilege in their behavior; by inspiring them through dedicated resistance, etc. The privileged, however, can contribute to the struggle too. They can also inspire: by working on dismantling their own privileges; by taking personal risks to right some of the wrongs they profit from; by putting up dedicated resistance themselves.

In the context of the Philippines, it appears that the 1999 Seattle anti-WTO protests — which, despite a notable presence of comrades from the global South, were dominated by activists from the global North — provided major inspiration for the islands’ contemporary anarchist movement. At the same time, the Seattle protests drew a lot of inspiration from struggles of Southern communities. This only confirms the important multilateral aspect of the anti-privilege struggle. A more personal example might be the positive reception in the Philippines of a pamphlet published by Alpine Anarchist Productions, a project I have been involved with for about ten years. “The Patong Fire” tells the story of a (fictional) arson attack committed by five Euro-American travelers against tourist developments in Thailand. Apparently, many comrades in the Philippines identified with the anti-colonial critique formulated in the pamphlet. To our particular delight, Brand X, a Quezon City-based punk band, has turned the story into a punk

rock song. This, in turn, inspires every one involved with Alpine Anarchist Productions. Here an alliance has been built based on common sentiments and convictions.

It remains mandatory, of course, to never forget the unequal distribution of privilege over the alliances we build. Most importantly, activists from the global North have to remain conscious of how much easier it is for them to access resources: books, computers, money, travel documents, etc. There are different ways to share these resources: travel grants can be organized; embassies can be petitioned to grant visas; radical projects can be supported with work, ideas, materials; outlets for voices from the global South can be created in the global North, etc. This is not a matter of generosity. It is a matter of justice. What sometimes complicates the process of sharing for activists is not knowing where and how to share, being afraid of making wrong choices, wanting to reflect, or trying to avoid feeling pressured. All these are understandable concerns. Once again, it is community building that can help. If we know people, it is not only easier to share with them confidently, it is also easier for them to ask confidently. Concrete relations make all the difference.

Anarchism, as a set of principles opposed to hierarchy and authority, and as a political movement fighting for open and egalitarian communities, provides both a basis and a goal for transnational community building. It also entails a number of safety valves against dynamics that have done a lot of harm to 20th century leftist movements, also in the Philippines: sectarianism, in-fighting, internal control, even torture and killing. Anarchism is in many ways the most attractive arena in which to engage in political resistance. More and more activists in the Philippines seem to reach the same conclusion. Arguably, the biggest danger within anarchism – and the biggest argument in favor of the orthodox Left – is a potential lack of organization. There is no doubt that broad people's struggles need effective forms of organization to confront the hegemonic power of the state and capital. However, no one has ever said that anarchism is against all forms of organization. In fact, anarchism is all about organization: self-organization. What self-organization needs is individual commitment and discipline. I dare say that the success or failure of anarchist ventures depends predominantly on these qualities. Anarchists insist on not needing institutional authority to get things done. Insisting on this is easy. Proving it is the challenge.

What makes the case of the Philippines particularly interesting in the context of international anarchism is the country's rather unique colonial legacy. What separates the Philippines from most other countries in the global South is a strong entrenchment in Euro-American culture, an exceptionally high level of education, and a widespread use and command of the English language (which, for better or for worse, has become the language of international communication). For Filipino activists this means that it is easier for them than for many other activists from the global South to connect with movements in the global North and to make themselves heard.

Sometimes you can hear people speak of a "Third World anarchism" and of how important such an anarchism would be for the global anarchist movement, as it would challenge the dominance of "First World" anarchists and its (neo)colonial implications. Needless to say, a "Third World anarchism" can never be anything but a strategic phenomenon to serve this purpose. In the long term, anarchism cannot be divided into different worlds. It will be a "one world anarchism", or it will be none.

However, in the transition period that is unfortunately needed to build bridges between the worldwide anarchist communities, the Philippines could indeed play a pioneering role. Recent essays published by Bas Umali – "Archipelagic Confederation" and "Autonomous Traditions in the Archipelago" – are just one proof of this.

A couple of years ago I started discussing the compilation of an English book on anarchism in the Philippines with some Filipino comrades. I still think that this would be a wonderful project. Its importance would go way beyond the Philippines themselves. From what I understand, the question of language was debated at length. It makes perfect sense that some comrades would want to focus on publishing in Tagalog rather than in English. This would without doubt help to tie one's politics closer to local realities. The advantage of English is obviously international transparency. Eventually, of course, the answer does not have to be an either-or. In the long term, it can be a both-and.

Regardless of matters of language, the anarchist movement in the Philippines is bound to leave an impact, nationally as much as internationally. What might be most important is that, no matter what they tell you and no matter how desperate the situation looks, there is never reason to give up. There are always ways to make our own individual lives and the lives of our communities better and the power of the state and capital weaker. There are always ways to inspire those without power and to trouble those with too much. There are always ways to keep the dream of a better world alive and to challenge the realities that claim to be unchangeable. The beauty of anarchism lies not

(only) in some distant utopia, but in every moment of rebellion, self-determination and solidarity. In the Philippines as much as anywhere else.

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