

The Libertarian Elements in the Philippine Archipelago

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Contents

- On Contextualizing Anarchism 3
- A History of Non-State Societies and Resistance to Authority 3
- Episodes of Anarchy and the Commune 4
- Bayanihan* as Mutual Aid 4
- Episodes of Direct Action 4
- The Anarchy of Everyday Life 5
- Not Foreign, but Already Present 5
- Towards an Anarchist Social Movement 5
- References 6

On Contextualizing Anarchism

Anarchists in a particular area cannot simply import anarchism wholesale. Anarchism must contextualize itself in the specific contexts of where it exists.

When anarchism came to China, Korea and Japan, anarchists in these countries contextualized anarchist ideas for their own contexts. In China, anarchists linked anti-authoritarian and anti-statist ideals in Taoism like *wu-wei* and *wu-jin* to anarchism. In Japan, anarchists experimented with Buddhist anarchism, wedding the already liberatory aspects in Zen Buddhism to anarchist politics. In Korea, anarchists contextualized their anarchism in the particular colonized conditions under Japanese imperialism and even set up the revolutionary Shinmin Commune as a base for anti-imperialism.

Anarchists in the Philippines then are then posed the same question: How do we situate anarchism in the liberatory politics in the Philippine archipelago? What aspects in the archipelago are already liberatory?

A History of Non-State Societies and Resistance to Authority

Historically, it is plausible that there existed indigenous groups in the archipelago that organized non-hierarchically and therefore anarchically. After all, the Ifugao people carved the very mountains into the Ifugao Rice Terraces in a monumental effort. They did this all without use of governments or states. The Ifugao and other tribes that organize in an egalitarian manner still live today, despite the legacy of colonization and the continuation of settlements in their homelands.

It would be mistaken to proclaim that anarchy was the mode of governance before colonization as this falls into a romantic notion of a 'noble savage' or a 'pure' indigeneity unsullied by the state. In reality, indigenous peoples – indeed all peoples – have widely diverse ways of organizing themselves. There have been hunter-gatherers that organize hierarchically and urban people that organize in an egalitarian manner.¹ This is no different in the Archipelago: there are indigenous groups like the Ifugao who organize themselves in an egalitarian manner and there are indigenous groups like the Maranao who maintain nobility and royal houses.

Where anarchism can situate itself in the archipelago is in the history of struggle against authority. Anarchism in the archipelago is but a young member in the long line of indigenous opposition to colonial authority and domination. Roger White says it best that anarchism finds itself as part of a family of other anti-authoritarian struggles throughout history:

A different way of understanding anarchism in relation to the centuries-old struggle against arbitrary power is to view it as the newest member of a global family that includes numerous historical and present day communal societies and struggles against authority. The village communalism of the Ibo, and First Nations like the Zuni and the Hopi are a part of the family. The indigenous autonomist movements for self determination going on today in West Papua and Chiapas, Mexico with the EZLN are a part of the family. The international prison abolitionist movement, perhaps the most coordinated attack on the state's monopoly of the administration of justice, has deep anti-authoritarian currents, just as the numerous stateless hunter and gatherer bands, clans, and nomadic tribes that have managed to survive centuries without armies, flags, or money systems do.²

Thus working within this post-colonial framework we find that the *Indokumentado* (the undocumented natives) and the rebels of the Dagohoy Rebellion who resisted the efforts of the Spanish colonial authority to constrain them to labor camps to be the natural forebears to an anarchism in the archipelago. Anarchism in the archipelago situates itself in the innumerable acts of resistance against the colonizers and their institutional descendant in the state. While

¹ See examples in David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2004). Available at: <https://evols.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/10524/1557/paradigm14.pdf>

² Roger White, *Post Colonial Anarchism* (The Anarchist Library, 2016 [2005]). Available at: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/roger-white-post-colonial-anarchism>

anarchism is a relatively recent phenomenon, libertarian elements have very much already existed in the archipelago for as long as there has been resistance to tyranny and greed.

Episodes of Anarchy and the Commune

From indigenous statelessness, an episode of anarchism can be found in the first decade of the 20th century in Isabelo de los Reyes. Tutored by anarchists and revolutionary socialists while exiled in Catalonia, Isabelo de los Reyes brought Marxist and Anarchist theories to the Philippines in 1901 during the American colonial period. He used the principles of Marx and Malatesta to set up the Union Obrera Democratica (UOD), the first labor union federation in the Philippines. While not specifically anarchist, the UOD did incorporate mutual aid and direct action into their praxis and was a thorn in the side of the American colonial administration.³

A later example of libertarian elements in Philippine history is the Diliman Commune which was a student uprising against the Marcos administration in 1971. While the uprising was ideologically influenced by National Democracy (a Philippine variant of Marxist-Leninist-Maoism), it contained several libertarian elements. Being a spontaneous uprising, it was not dominated and directed by a vanguard party. Revolutionary students and faculty used direct action in defense of their commune instead of relying on representatives and mediators. Power was not monopolized by a few select leaders and decisions were made in an egalitarian manner in councils and assemblies using consensus.⁴

Bayanihan as Mutual Aid

Just as Peter Kropotkin in his book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* finds and situates mutual aid in nature and various human societies,⁵ so can we also situate mutual aid in the archipelago. Filipinos already know mutual aid as *bayanihan*. Mutual aid or *bayanihan* is a mode of cooperation based on solidarity. It is us helping each other because it benefits all. The image of *bayanihan* is often a village (or a *bayan*) working together to carry a house. By themselves the villagers could not lift the house, but all together they can – their toil is minimized with collective action. What is more is that by participating, they know the other villagers will similarly assist them when they need it. Thus mutual aid or *bayanihan* becomes a system of support and collective action that improves the quality of life for everyone involved. It is then a safety net that everyone can participate in.

Episodes of Direct Action

Libertarian elements can also be seen in contemporary times. Land and housing struggles in the Philippines are sometimes fought with direct action. The urban housing group Kadamay in 2017 used direct action to occupy and directly expropriate empty homes in Bulacan by occupying them with families in need of a home. They were also able to defend this expropriation through direct action to the point of even President Duterte conceding the issue. Indeed, they were even decried as ‘anarchists,’ much to the chagrin of their National Democratic orientation.⁶

We also see direct action in the countryside. Peasant groups use direct action to till idle land they do not own in a practice called *bungkalan*. Instead of relying on the notoriously slow and corrupt Department for Agrarian Reform to expropriate land from landlords and oligarchs, these farmers do it themselves and hurt no-one except property

³ William Henry Scott, *The Union Obrera Democratica: First Filipino Labor Union* (Quezon City: New Day, 1992), pg 13–18.

⁴ Randy Nobleza & Jong Pairez, ‘Ang Potensyal na Anarkistang Tendensiya ng Diliman Commune,’ *Gasera*, n.d. Available at <https://libcom.org/blog/ang-potensyal-na-anarkistang-tendensiya-ng-diliman-commune-23022020>

⁵ For examples of mutual aid, see Pëtr Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (The Anarchist Library, 2009 [1902]) available at: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-mutual-aid-a-factor-of-evolution>, and Peter Gelderloos, *Anarchy Works*, (The Anarchist Library, 2011 [2010]), available at: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/peter-gelderloos-anarchy-works>

⁶ Pia Ranada, Duterte lets Kadamay have Bulacan housing units, *Rappler*, April 4 2017, available at: <https://rappler.com/nation/duterte-kadamay-housing-police-soldiers>. For a timeline of the events, see also the well-cited Wikipedia article on the Pandi housing project occupation: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandi_housing_project_occupation

rights in the process. Peasant group Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas has called *bungkalan* the ‘collective efforts of farmers to assert genuine land reform.’⁷ *Bungkalan* then becomes a form of resistance against feudal landholders who hoard land for themselves.

Direct action is also practiced by environmental activists. In Palawan, environmental activists take it upon themselves to confiscate chainsaws and guns from illegal loggers and poachers.⁸ These activists understand that if the state cannot protect their environments, they will have to do it themselves, sometimes at the cost of their lives.

Direct action also dovetails with mutual aid. After the reemergence of anarchism in the archipelago, Food Not Bombs organizations were set up as systems of mutual aid/*bayanihan*. Food Not Bombs are networks of mutual aid that freely distribute food among indigent people. These networks are organized along anarchist lines using voluntary association and egalitarian organizing.⁹ Rather than waiting for an authority to organize food distribution or lobbying for such a thing in congress, Food Not Bombs does it themselves. They are able to distribute food to people all the while rejecting the use of hierarchical organization.

The Anarchy of Everyday Life

Beyond libertarian elements in existing movements, it can be argued that *anarchy* already exists all around us, as Bas Umali suggests in his essay *Anarki: Akin ang Buhay Ko – Sariling Determinasyon at Pagpapasya Tungo sa Panlipunang Rebolusyon* [*Anarchy: My Life is My Own – Self Determination and Deciding Towards Social Revolution*]. For Umali, anarchy is mutual cooperation without need of coercion or payment. Anarchy is whenever we relate to each other as equals and peers and whenever we discuss among ourselves the issues we have instead of relying on an authority figure. We already naturally organize ourselves in egalitarian and non-hierarchical lines when we organize among friends. Human cooperation is already natural.¹⁰ What anarchists want is for all social relations to be organized under egalitarian lines with free association and free from hierarchy and coercion.

Not Foreign, but Already Present

These examples of libertarian elements – Mutual aid/*bayanihan*, direct action and egalitarian organizing – are then not foreign ideas. They already exist today in our lives and in our contexts. The task of the anarchists in the archipelago is to identify these elements and contextualize these for an anarchist praxis.

Currently, anarchists in the archipelago have been able to create spaces for autonomy and mutual aid such as infoshops and Food Not Bombs networks. Infoshops are spaces for the dissemination and propagation of anarchist materials and are sites for autonomous organizing. These Infoshops and Food Not Bombs are embedded in urban communities and conduct community outreach and mutual aid activities. These are spaces where anarchist principles can be practiced and taught. When there is a need for local action such as in resisting evictions, these local anarchist groups mobilize for these tasks.

Towards an Anarchist Social Movement

However, while creating spaces for autonomy away from state, capital, and hierarchies is good it is still insufficient for liberation for revolutionary anarchists. We revolutionary anarchists are not content with spaces for autonomy, we

⁷ Ryan Macasero, ‘A closer look at “bungkalan”, the supposedly sinister plot,’ *Philippine Star*, October 29 2018, available at: <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/10/29/1864216/closer-look-bungkalan-supposedly-sinister-plot>. See also, Anna Bueno, ‘In bungkalan, organic and sustainable farming is a mass movement,’ *CNN Philippines*, April 2 2019, available at: <https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2019/4/2/bungkalan.html>

⁸ Nick Aspinwall, ‘Threats, raids and murders stalk Filipino environment activists,’ *Al Jazeera*, 6 December 2019, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/threats-raids-murders-stalk-filipino-environment-activists-191128071615516.html>

⁹ For a history of the movement, see Taks A. Barbin, *Ang Food Not Bombs sa Kapuluan* (Rizal: Safehouse Infoshop, 2018).

¹⁰ Bas Umali, *Anarki: Akin ang Buhay Ko – Sariling Determinasyon at Pagpapasya Tungo sa Panlipunang Rebolusyon*, (AID Kolektibo, NoN Collective, n.d.). Available at: <http://libcom.org/files/anarki-akin-ang-buhay-ko.pdf>

desire total liberation for all. More than an autonomous anarchism, we must forward a *revolutionary anarchism* in the archipelago. Much more than creating autonomous spaces, this revolutionary anarchism aims to challenge capital and the state. By *revolutionary* we mean a movement to abolish the current state of things, to challenge hierarchy and domination and not merely carve spaces for autonomy.

For anarchism to become revolutionary, it must become a *social movement*. Anarchism as a social movement entails organizing at the point-of-production and organizing communities. We have already established that libertarian elements already exist in social movements in the archipelago. What anarchists would like are these social movements to consciously organize in non-hierarchical and egalitarian manner and use the tools promoted by anarchism like direct action, solidarity, and mutual aid. By forwarding such a liberatory politics, these social movements have the potential to become spaces for creative deliberation that expands the agency of the people involved to become full subjects in their politics. Such an anarchist social movement ought to show people that they have the collective power to emancipate themselves. Such an anarchist social movement would do so not as an authority figure, but as a partner and collaborator in liberation. Anarchists are not the kind of revolutionaries who 'grant' liberation to others, as we think liberation is a thing that can only be done by those oppressed. As the classic socialist adage goes: the liberation of the worker is the task of the worker alone. Liberation is not granted, it is built, taken and defended. This liberation is tied up together and requires the liberty of everybody to be fully enjoyed. As anarchists, we must be in the business of 'arousing the sentiment of rebellion' of people and allow them to know they have this power to liberate themselves when organized.

We hope that by situating anarchism in the already-existing liberatory politics in the archipelago can better contextualize the anarchist tradition in the Philippines. Libertarian elements very much already exist, our task now is to wed these to an anarchist politics and make steps towards our liberation.

References

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