

The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism among Anarchists

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A review of Hakim Bey's *Millennium*

According to Hakim Bey, he wrote *Millennium* to answer to the question of whether he still holds the position he staked out in *TAZ*. By reading *Millennium* we can both understand Bey's current theoretical position and how he placed *TAZ* in the first place. First off, Bey notes that between the two books the world changed: the Soviet Union fell apart. This has radical implications for anarchists. Before the fall, anarchists were the "third way" (not to be confused with Tony Blair's Third Way) and the real opposition to Capital was the Soviet Union. With the Soviet dissolution, anarchism has become the other of Capital. Where as when anarchism was the third way, anarchists could hang out in the cracks creating Temporary Autonomous Zones and not really confronting Capital or the State, we no longer have that luxury. Bey admits that it took him some time to realize the difference that this made; in fact, in the early nineties he still counseled anarchists that the present was like the Dark Ages and, as with the mystics and monks Bey so loves, we should hang out and meditate in the monasteries until they are over. It seems that it took the Zapatistas to wake Bey to the implications of anarchism becoming the primary opposition to Capital. In *Millennium*, Bey concludes that *TAZ* is no longer an option, now we must leave the monasteries and begin the Jihad (the revolution).

But what is this Jihad Bey has declared? With a jumble of badly digested academic, post-colonial theory, the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, Islam and the sound-bytes of Subcommander Marcos, Bey paints a colonial picture of our 'newly' globalized world. In Bey's world, capitalism and the state are no longer the central enemies (in fact, they begin to drop out of Bey's analysis, as capital no longer exploits or alienates, it only produces 'sameness'); instead, colonialism in the form of globalization that produces 'sameness' (homogenization) is what we must confront with a revolution of 'difference.' With this logic, the form revolution must take to protect difference, to fight colonialism, is national liberation. Thus, Bey's acritical support for the EZLN revolt (a revolt Bey joyfully calls the first postmodern revolution).

For Bey, difference is constituted by ethnic nationalism. Accordingly, we need to understand the "revolutionary implication of culture." (43) Or, more directly, Bey states, "...true organic integral difference is revolutionary, now. It has to be, because it's opposed to the single world, the mono-world, the mono-culture of capital." (25) We have to ask, however, what is "true" or "organic" about ethnic nationalities? One of the central problems with Bey's anti-colonial outlook is that it tends to naturalize nationalities and thus nationalism. It makes them seem natural and eternal instead of historically specific and socially constructed. Contra Bey's reading, nationalities are produced at certain times and by certain forces.

And, instead of just assuming they are eternal and fixed, as Bey simplistically does, we need to pay attention to how such ethnic differences come to be created and articulated by political and social actors for particular reasons.

Bey does allow for “positive” and “negative” difference or particularities (nationalities). Positive or “true” nationalities are those that aren’t imperialistic (those that stay in their borders and don’t dominate their minorities). Bey offers the examples of the Zapatistas, Bosnia, Slovenia, Macedonia, the Ukraine, the Kurds and the Chechens as positive nationalities and nationalisms; and, he cites the Serbs and Russia as negative or hegemonic particularities. Yet in fine New York Times style, these nationalities in and of themselves remain unquestioned. This is the weakness of Bey’s sameness/difference dichotomy, in which, he tells us, we have to choose one or the other. Thus instead of acting in revolutionary solidarity with the struggle against the state and capital, we should choose difference or nationalism (versus globalization), and try to influence it to take the non-imperialist, nice form of nationalism.

The Poverty of Choice

Bey’s either/or choice is an expression of the poverty of imagination inherent in much anti-globalization rhetoric: sameness or difference, globalization or nationalism. Thus Bey says, “...one cannot help but supporting Chechnya and the Kurds.” (100) We can’t help it, or as he also says, “we have to choose...” In Chechnya nationalists have begun to institute Shariat law and the death penalty (of course, for Bey, law and the Shariat have been redefined as no less than “the open road of the aimless wanderer.”(41)). Kurdish nationalists have been crushing all internal dissent for years; perhaps Bey should speak with Kurdish anarchists before jumping on the nationalist bandwagon. One wonders where Bey would stand in relation to the war in Kosovo. He has already stated that Serbian nationalism is bad and Bosnian is good, so I suppose he would stand with the KLA nationalist government in waiting (for Bey, there is the added benefit that the Kosovo Albanians are for the most part Muslims). Unfortunately for Bey, the KLA are now aligned with NATO, a force for ‘sameness’ if there ever was one. The contradictions of nationalism begin to mount.

The State versus Globalization

Bey’s anti-globalization ideology goes as far as to set up a facile opposition between globalization (‘sameness’) and the nation-state (‘difference’???). Bey states:

“Like religion, the State has simply failed to ‘go away’ — in fact, in a bizarre extension of the thesis of ‘Society against the State,’ we can even reimagine the State as an institutional type of ‘custom and right’ which Society can wield (paradoxically) against an even more ‘final’ shape of power — that of ‘pure Capitalism.’” (96) While in *TAZ* Bey, unlike many other anarchists, was simply waiting for the state to ‘go away’ on its own, in *Millennium* he has decided that, since it didn’t disappear, we could use it to fight Capitalism. Of course, in order to do so, we need to take over the state, to control it: Hakim Bey for President! Once our trusted comrades are firmly in power they will dismantle Capitalism and shore up the nationalist venture. Yet, while Clastres’ ‘Society Against the State’ shows that society developed customs to oppose the concentration and institutionalization of power, the nation-state grew up working with capital from its birth. Unlike the customs of gatherer/hunter societies that work to defuse power, the nation-states laws and institutions are organized to facilitate and protect the accumulation of capital.

One of the central myths that much of the current talk about ‘globalization’ propagates is that the state is opposed to the global accumulation and expansion of capital. Somehow there exists a “pure Capitalism” which needs no state to protect its property system, guarantee its currency, mediate its disputes and contain social conflict. But to realign ourselves with the state and nationalism is to align ourselves with the reproduction of capitalism as a system and against a certain set of capitalists. There is no “pure Capitalism” that wishes the state would disappear. The logic of capitalist accumulation continually works to refashion the state as it develops and changes its needs. Bey seems to think that globalization is about to do away with borders and the state. Yet the reality is quite the opposite. While borders are becoming more porous to the movement of goods and capital, they are becoming more controlled in terms of the movement of people. This works to capital’s advantage as capital needs to control and divide labor in order to increase exploitation. Without borders the poor could move from the third world where the rate of capitalist exploitation is highest and to areas where the living standards of the working class are much higher. Thus Bey’s nationalism actually works hand-in-hand with capitalism to insure the maintenance of borders and the control and division of labor. It is no surprise, therefore, that ethnic-nationalism has become one of the organizing narratives of the ‘90’s. It is the flipside of the narrative of globalization. These hegemonic narratives limit the imagination’s capacity to think of a different world. Thus they contain and recuperate oppositional forces. It is for this reason that we must always be careful of setting up such simple dichotomous choices such as Bey’s ‘sameness’ versus ‘difference’ or globalization versus nationalism. We must demand what has been made to seem as impossible instead of falling into ready-made categories of thought.

Poetic History

Bey's theories are grounded in history; unfortunately, his post-modern "poetic history" has more in common with myth than with a radical, critical history. The pirates of North Africa become "pirate utopias" without mention of the fact that their ships were, for the most part, powered by slaves at the oar (sounds like Bookchin's utopic slave society of the Ancient Greek city states). Col. Qaddafi's "Green Path" is part neo-Sufism, part anarcho-syndicalism.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The hierarchically organized, ethnic-nationalist Tong in China becomes an inspiration. And religion becomes revolutionary. Bey goes so far to state that "...it seems clear that without religion there will be no radical revolution." (84) The history of the Tong is rewritten or badly read by Bey to make them Taoists who supposedly collaborated with anarchists in the 1911 revolution in China. (84) The weak connection between the Tong and Taoism is about as weak as the connection between the Tong and the anarchists. We also shouldn't forget that the 1911 revolution was a nationalist revolution, something that doesn't bother Bey at all. And from this argument we are supposed to realize that religion is necessary to revolution. It is by such poetic rewriting of history that Bey claims to be able to save the concept of 'volk' or 'nationality.' "This concept was looted by base reaction and distorted into hegemonism of the worst sort, but it too can be rescued (an 'adventure' in itself). [We need to re-read Proudhon, Marx, Nietzsche, Landauer, Fourier, Benjamin, Bakhtin, the IWW, etc. — the way the EZLN re-reads Zapata!]" (45)

Bey's poetic history romanticizes cultural difference. Bey has called for a romantic Orientalism (are there other types?) that stresses the difference of the 'Orient' from the West. They were spiritual and we are secular and rational. This is the same argument that European Orientalism made over 100 years ago to justify its conquests. Bey's favorites are romantic Islam and Taoism. In this poetic history of firm cultural difference, the individual tends to disappear, as do some of those annoying facts.

Such romanticization, however, has little to offer a truly revolutionary movement. Instead, we need a critical history that exposes such romanticizations that help nationalist history maintain its dominance. Poetic history works with nationalist, mythic history in making ethnic-difference seem natural, fixed, and eternal. Critical history denaturalizes hegemonic history and allows us to imagine a truly different world as opposed to setting up the simplistic choice between globalization and nationalism. We must think outside of the dominant narratives that capitalism puts forth to us, and blinds us with.

Unfortunately, just as *TAZ*, with its implicit suggestion that anarchists wait in the cracks for the state to crumble, was an expression of the weakness of the anarchist movement in the late '80's, *Millennium*, with its more explicit demands that

anarchists align themselves with nationalism, religion, and the state, is a measure of its weakness in the early '90's. Hopefully, with the recent upswing in direct action by anarchists such expressions of weakness may be left behind as historical relics of a movement that had temporarily lost its ability to imagine and demand the impossible.

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