

“Facing the Enemy”: A platformist interpretation of the history of anarchist organization

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Facing the Enemy: A History of Anarchist Organization from Proudhon to May 1968 by Alexandre Skirda, translated by Paul Sharkey (AK Press, POB 40682, San Francisco, CA 94140–0682, USA; AK Press, POB 12766, Edinburgh, EH8 9YE, Scotland; & Kate Sharpley Library, BM Hurricane, London, WC1 3XX, England; 2002) 292 pp., \$17.95 paper.

Any history of anarchist currents and movements must also be a history of their organization. Radical ideas and practices are nothing if not aspects of a social engagement whose own content and structure *both* anticipate the new society that is desired. In fact, the theory and critique of organization has consistently been one of the most central and contested concerns of anarchists since Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin, Faure, Malatesta, Kropotkin and many, many others gave world-historical shape to the anarchist movement in the 19th Century.

It thus remains extremely important to this day for all anarchists to fully understand not only the major anarchist theories and critiques of organization, but also the history of the actual forms of organization used by anarchists around the world in well over a century of often highly-effective practice. Unfortunately, Alexandre Skirda in *Facing the Enemy* isn't going to be the person to write this history, despite Paul Sharkey's misleading English translation of the subtitle of the book as *A History of Anarchist Organization from Proudhon to May 1968*. (The original French title and subtitle actually translate more literally as “Individual Autonomy and Collective Force: Anarchists and Organization from Proudhon to our time.”)

What Skirda is equipped to do is something much narrower, that is to write a polemical *platformist interpretation* of the history of anarchist organization. *Facing the Enemy* is certainly not without value in providing a revealing look into the machinations of Marx in the First International, the various incarnations of Bakunin's secret societies, the effects of police interventions, and the manipulative mindsets and practices of those adopting platformist ideology, primarily in France. However, as a history of anarchist organization in general the book is often biased, intentionally incomplete, and occasionally illogical — quite clearly reflecting the limitations of the platformist ideology it preaches.

Every anarchist (and every would-be revolutionary) should take some time to study the history of the First International. However, given the apparent decline of interest within the anarchist milieu in unearthing its own history (paralleling a decline in interest in history within the larger media-saturated, spectator/internet society), even reading a short account like Skirda's would improve on most anarchists' knowledge of the situation. Of particular interest here is the period following the demise Marx's rump First International after he safely deposited its General Council with stooges in New York — a period of anarchist agitation too-often ignored in most of the full-scale accounts of the Marx/Bakunin, centralist/federalist conflict in the International.

Skirda's quick review of a few of Bakunin's various organizational schemes and programs for his Alliances and International Brotherhoods is another worthwhile contribution to anarchist history, especially since most biographical and historical studies of Bakunin and those he influenced were done before important source materials were excavated in recent decades. However, Bakunin's penchant for invisible, "collective dictatorship" (p. 15), always unsettling to anti-authoritarians who study his ideas, is played down a bit too unconvincingly here. Secret societies of revolutionaries make much more sense when anarchists operate in countries where all radical speech is suppressed (as Bakunin most often did). But the invisible "dictatorship" of anarchist revolutionaries from within the masses is a formulation just as much given to authoritarian tensions as the more well-known and oft-criticized Marxist formulation of "the dictatorship of the proletariat."

Another valuable aspect of Skirda's account of anarchist history is his periodic focus on the effects of police surveillance, infiltration and provocation. This has huge implications for contemporary anarchists. There are the obvious dangers for autonomous, small-group activities (primarily the odd provocateur urging worthless or suicidal acts of violence, since widespread infiltration and surveillance are more difficult in such groups). While there are also many dangers for larger sectarian groupings or the various types of federation (more obviously revealed in accounts of the COINTELPRO destabilization of the '60s & '70s New Left in the

US, particularly aimed at the Black Panthers and AIM), in which surveillance and infiltration are much easier, as are attempts to incite internecine strife.

However, like most platformists (and like authoritarians in general), Skirda considers many important historical anarchist ideas and criticisms of organization to be impractical or inefficient because under free self-organization there is nothing to compel anarchists to fall into line as a disciplined mass of followers under a unitary ideology at the call of their leadership. Like too many organizationalists he prefers to condemn any anarchists who balk at attempts to discipline and control them, ridiculing their refusals to subordinate their own judgments for those of more-or-less democratic processes or less-than-transparent organizational directives. This is where sneering efforts at manipulation of the reader enter his narrative more and more frequently, as in chapter 8: "Anti-organizationists and bombers." Skirda is as well aware as anyone else that political bombings have been by far more often the work of organizations than of isolated, demoralized individuals, and that even within the anarchist milieu around the end of the 19th century attentats weren't predominantly the work of anarchist individualists, much less the semi-mythical "anti-organizationists."

Relying on a piece of testimony at a trial as his only flimsy evidence, Skirda concludes that all the anarchist groups in 1880s Paris were really non-existent except as "temporary get-togethers," with "no connection and no coordination involved" even between groups in federation. If a formal platform, membership cards or dues, and a secretariat didn't exist, then, for the organizational fetishists, obviously there was no organization involved! Similarly, for the authoritarian left, without formal offices of leadership and means of controlling members, only chaos can ensue. Both views oppose the full range of anarchist self-organization, which can be formal or informal, depending upon its purposes and the situations in faces.

Neither is Skirda very clear in his analysis of the various illegalist, insurrectionary, "propaganda of the deed" tendencies which came to prominence in the anarchist milieu of the 1870s and 1880s, at times mixing the various ideas, and portraying them as a single phenomenon centering on the coincidental movement-wide infatuation with dynamite and attentats. In its most general meaning, of course, "propaganda by deed" signifies, as Malatesta said, the "act of insurrection, designed to assert socialist principles by deeds" (p. 39), or in more contemporary terms, the potentially exemplary nature of direct action. And anarchist illegalism at its most basic refuses to acknowledge capitalist laws as in any way valid limits to anarchist activity. While insurrectionary anarchism advocates support for the immediate break with all hierarchical, capitalist institutions and social relations whenever and wherever possible.

Clearly, the most effective anarchist propaganda will always be the actual, direct implementation of anarchist social relationships, and in this sense "propaganda by

deed” has always been a core practice of most anarchists, despite the ill repute gained by the term itself after it became much more narrowly associated with bombings and attentats in the popular mind. And the most effective anarchists have always refused to be limited by the laws imposed by state and capital to maintain our slavery, though the term “illegalism” has also fallen into ill repute after being associated with a few particular French anarchists whose law-breaking tended to stretch the credulity of their commitments to anarchism. While every form of social revolutionary anarchism has always advocated insurrectionary practice, since without a complete break with capitalist social institutions revolution is clearly impossible — though the question of appropriate timing for insurrectionary acts remains widely contested.

To criticize any of these three aspects of anarchist practice should always call for careful distinctions to be made in what is being criticized. Ignorant claims that “propaganda by deed” necessarily requires bombings or tyrannicide ignore the fruitful history of anarchist direct action (as well as the fact that some bombings and tyrannicides have at times been appropriate and effective). While condemnations of illegalism often ignore the fact that every genuine revolt necessarily involves the repudiation of all illegitimate, capitalist laws. And categorical repudiations of insurrectionary practice always imply the defense of the institutions of capital and state, which will never wither away without our active participation in their demise.

Just as importantly, no one should lose sight of the that the relatively brief anarchist craze for dynamite and fulminates of mercury, along with assassinations by dagger or pistol, in the decades immediately before and after the turn of the 19th to the 20th century has little to do with the more general validity of extra-legal direct action and insurrectionary or revolutionary violence. While individual and small-group attentats have sometimes been the work of despairing solidarity (like Alexander Berkman’s attempted assassination of the industrialist mass-murderer Frick), they have often been tactically and strategically effective (like the activities of some of the anarchist *pistoleros* in Spain).

Which brings up the strangest aspect of Skirda’s platformist interpretation of anarchist organizational history. The FAI (the Iberian Anarchist Federation) is almost absent from his analysis, despite the fact that this notorious federation may be the one example of an anarchist organization that is admired by social revolutionary anarchists of all tendencies — at least so far as I’m aware. I’m sure the fact that the FAI’s practice in the decade leading up to the Spanish Revolution was contrary to platformist dogmas has a part to play in Skirda’s avoidance of the subject, but no platformist interpretation of history will ever convince anyone by ignoring the most historically important example of a large anarchist federation. However, rather than discussing the actual organizational structure and dynamics of the FAI,

Skirda is content to complain that the FAI ought to have followed the *Platform* instead of ignoring it. And after this he gives a confusing account of the CNT refusal of social revolution and policy of collaboration with political authorities. And this without indicating the faintest understanding that the only genuine revolutionary question posed in 1936 was whether the people in arms would organize their own social revolution (which they attempted throughout much of the countryside) or submit to authorities, whether those authorities were constituted in Madrid, the Catalan Generalitat, or the CNT and UGT (as they largely did in Barcelona and other cities).

The usefulness of Skirda's history plummets with his account of the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Suddenly the poor, misunderstood *Organizational Platform* is portrayed as the be-all and end-all of anarchism. The general opposition within the international anarchist movement to the more unsavory aspects of the *Platform* must be explained away, distorted, undermined with personal innuendo and accusations of petty plots. And a minority organizational practice which has never accomplished much of lasting value within the international anarchist movement becomes the complete center of attention for Skirda, as though the vast majority of non-platformist and anti-platformist anarchists count for little or nothing. In fact, Skirda often demeans the vast majority of anarchists, their ideas and practices as chaotic individualist nut-cases of one sort or another. This despite the fact that platformists, for all their delusionary bombast about organizing "all of the wholesome elements of the anarchist movement into one umbrella organization" (p. 211), have almost always attracted only a small minority of anarchists to follow their sectarian tenets, often only those least committed to anarchist principles to begin with.

In one of his illogical tirades against opponents of the *Platform* (p. 142), Skirda exclaims: "If one wanted to reject [the *Platform*], then one also had to throw out 'the baby with the bathwater,' that is, repudiate what was...the most radical revolutionary experiment of the century." Which of course is nonsensical in the extreme. The Makhnovist experiment was one of the most radical of the century, but that experiment had nothing directly to do with injecting authoritarian leftist organizational practices into the anarchist milieu ten years later!

Skirda continues, not understanding how any anarchist could ever oppose the incoherent synthesis of leftist organization and anarchist ideology proposed by the *Platform*: "Who could challenge that? Always the same old figures, the usual ditherers, the incorrigible blatherers, all those who in the end had something to lose, be it their petty vanity, or ultimately cozy position in established society. That said, the loudest opposition came from the Russian émigré community...and a handful of anarchist elders." But all was not lost for Skirda, since years later a few platformist-inspired groups managed to organize themselves and carry on the

ever-misunderstood, ever-persecuted cause. Of course, the actual practice of some of these platformist groups proved to be a pathetic travesty, with platformists taking secret control of the French post-World War II Anarchist Federation with a manipulative scheme worthy of any power-hungry Marxist-Leninists (recounted in Chapter 18).

Despite its many failures, *Facing the Enemy* is an important book and I recommend that every anarchist seriously committed to encouraging social revolution read it. Along with chronicling an episodic, Eurocentric and polemical (but still worthwhile) history of anarchism, it provides a fairly comprehensive catalog of the most tempting authoritarian, leftist compromises that cut the heart out of anarchist practice and turn anarchist theory into a rigid ideology. Ultimately, the unintended message of Skirda's book is that not only is the platformism it pushes hopelessly anachronistic in today's anarchist milieu, but historically it has been the ideology of demoralized losers.

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