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Anarchism out West: Some reflections on sources

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Abstract

The 'West' of the title provides a hook for discussing three contacts with anarchist thought. The first contact is a personal one with Ammon Hennacy and Bruce Utah Phillips, two figures of the small world of Salt Lake City anarchism of the 1960s (way out West of the Rockies). The second contact is with an idealized conception of Amazonians as exemplars of a kind of anarchist sociality imagined as a retrievable model (way out in the interior of Brazil/South America). The third contact is with a strand of rationalist-naturalist thought closely associated with Chomsky, and its exclusion from anthropology (way out in the EthnoWest).

Keywords

Amer-Indians, Chomsky, Clastres, Ammon Hennacy, Utah Phillips

Anthropological interest in anarchism has had two faces: the espousal of the (frequently utopian) possibilities of anarchist forms of sociality on the basis of what is found in the ethnographic and historical record; and the study of anarchism as an object of analysis (as for example in recent social movements). Because there is so little agreement on examples of actually existing anarchism, however, much of the discussion is based on projection and speculation. Anthropology and anarchism seem to have, as Morris (2005) puts it, an elective affinity, one perhaps acknowledged more by non-anthropologists than within the discipline. This article looks briefly at three instances/examples of actually existing anarchism and raises questions about the nature of substantive links between anthropology and anarchism. It may be an odd contribution to a forum[1] such as this in as much as it basically displays scepticism towards the usefulness of an anthropology-and-anarchism connection which currently has such visibility.[2] That is not to claim a

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destructive goal, for, as will be clear towards the end, there is an argument for the connection between anthropology and anarchist thinking, but it is one that has largely been rejected by academic anthropology, despite the apparent openness toward anarchist perspectives.

The first part of this article draws on personal experience. In one sense this is a complete irrelevance in a putatively critical discussion of anthropology and anarchism, but it does afford the possibility of talking of and making observations about actually existing anarchism rather than speculating about past or future possibilities. The personal connections certainly don't confer any authority, but are presented, briefly, in the spirit of disclosure, and because of the contrast between an actually existing anarchism and some of the idealizations currently in vogue.

As a teenager I knew about anarchist thought and practice through my association with the late Bruce 'Utah' Phillips whose anarchist reference, and subsequently mine, was Ammon Hennacy.[3] Both of them illustrated how difficult it was to be an anarchist and certainly didn't provide much in the way of demonstrating a compelling link between anarchism and some of the key conceptions which have, for some, intimated a natural affinity between anthropology and anarchism. In particular, given the dependence/necessity in anthropological thought on a notion of socio-logic or culture (the crucial point being a dialectical relationship between structure and agency, baldly), the refusal, as in the case of Phillips and Hennacy, to contextualize their anarchism within a social model subverts a comfortable association between anarchism-in-practice and anthropology-in-practice. Anarchism of this sort is so system-hostile as to be unincorporable within a social scientific view. From the vantage points of Phillips and Hennacy, for example, the anthropological notion of society/culture/collectivity was far too system-generous as well as ahistorical. The personal, anarchist stance was, despite evident attention to social context, not in thrall to it. Anarchism for them was a life of solitary as well as collective devotion to principled behaviour while anthropology, as a comparative practice, is necessarily located in a different space where moral injunction is typically subordinate or in addition to other considerations.[4] In short, from the perspective offered by a lived anarchism, the potential fit with an academic perspective seems fraught. To the degree that anthropological practice required a degree of detachment (such that one could, for example, 'examine' anarchism), there was no basis for association.

Hennacy, who died in 1970, was closely associated with Dorothy Day's *Catholic Worker*, and in the early 1960s established the Joe Hill House on the outskirts of Salt Lake City, at 3462 S. 4th W., near the railroad tracks so that hobo rail-riders could have a place to crash. He had led an ascetic and migratory life of protest up to that point and in many respects was a modern Jeremiah, protesting on his own in front of the state capital building against the war in Indochina, against taxes for the war machine, against the death penalty (and Utah provided a particularly vivid backdrop vis-à-vis the death penalty: the state was notorious for providing the option of the firing squad as well as hanging and the electric chair; beheading had also been available at one point).

Hennacy's anarchism was austere and solitary and it was not one dependent on organization: he set an example and wrote extensively about his choices, but he was hardly a proselytizer, nor did he moralize about the shortcomings of others. His target was the systemic oppression of human spirit promulgated by Church and state, and as a veteran of several religious tendencies he had a lot of on-the-job religious experience – with Quakers, Baptists and Catholics. Salt Lake City represented a unique fusion of secular and religious institutional power given the command that the Church of Latter Day Saints – the Mormons – has over Utah society, but I don't know that it became a settling place for him for that reason as much as it was because it was the site of Joe Hill's execution in 1915.[5]

Hennacy typified a kind of Christian socialist anarchism that seems terribly *passé* in light of direct-action trends which prevail today under an anarchist banner, and the degree to which his anarchism was continuously framed by a preoccupation with organized religion gives it a decidedly 19th-century/pre-modern flavour.

Bruce 'Utah' Phillips, far better known than Hennacy,[6] was a Wobbly (which Hennacy was as well), musician, activist and story-teller. Phillips was involved in and supported the Joe Hill House, but unlike Ammon, did not live there. In fact, at one point he might have been a guest, for his anarchist formation was partially on the rails as a hobo.

Although Phillips shared little of the religious idiom of Hennacy's espousal of anarchism, his political philosophy was similar: within or outside a movement or organization, you were responsible for the consequences of your action or inaction. Apropos voting as a political act, for instance – and Phillips finally broke down in 2004[7] and voted, not for Kerry, but against the war – he followed Hennacy who said that your body was your ballot: 'Cast that body ballot on behalf of the people around you every day of your life, every day. And don't let anybody ever tell you *you* haven't voted' (quoted in Crane, 2004).

Phillips was obviously much more in tune with the anarchism of direct action and organization, but also aware of the contradiction that bedevilled a politics that could only morally function from the fringe just as, in his livelihood, he was a professional performer whose milieu was the stage, yet he was decidedly outside of show business. In an intriguing interview he gave to Moshe Cohen (2002) Phillips spoke at length about the connections between vaudeville and his political work as an anarchist, pointing out that one of the ways that a vaudevillian works is through being seen to live a role rather than act it, a reason for his pitching his professional work at what he called the sub-industrial level, not show business. This involved, paradoxically, rejecting the whole notion of being a 'political singer' and insisting instead on being a 'folk singer', on the grounds that if you want to change people's minds, you have to show them how to do it themselves, they can't accept it as an instruction from you.

> People have to change their own minds, you can't change people. They change on
> their own . . . you just give them the tools to do that and the time and the space to do

that . . . . Beatin' people over the head or saying you're wrong, yelling at them, I see that doesn't work . . . the worst organized concerts I have done are by political people because the political people treat me like an organizing tool and not an American worker, and then I have to yell at them. You know: 'here's my union card, now treat me like a human being' and they're the worst audiences as far as that goes because everybody expects me to do their political agenda. (Cohen, 2002)

Even though Hennacy and Phillips operated in different ways as anarchists, one basically in relation to a religious idiom, the other basically in relation to a political idiom, their anarchism was not partible, and as expressed in the quotation above, an *anarchist agenda* is not straightforwardly a *political agenda.*

Within an anthropology that includes in its remit a political stance, even if that be as mild as drawing on the ethnographic record to demonstrate the viability of other forms of sociation, it is difficult to see where the actually existing anarchism such as represented by Hennacy and Phillips fits in. It is a moral posture within which is embedded a political stance rooted not in explanation and analysis, but action. That tendency may well be evident in modern forms of direct action, but the anthropological content seems quite superfluous except with regard to one issue: drawing on an anarchism accessible through anthropological investigation in the field.[8]

That is a long, digressive introduction to a simple point concerning the meeting up of anthropology and anarchism. If anything, anarchism might be an object of analysis of anthropology, but in terms of an anarchist anthropology[9] it is hard to see how projects of such different orientation can be meaningfully merged in ways that are mutually complementary.

Within academic anthropology, however, where anarchist currents have long had wavering recognition, the main connection between the two has been based on the speculation that anthropological research across a range of societies has revealed the possibility for a utopian society based in part on what has been possible in the past, that is, not just a hypothetical utopia but one grounded in actual history/pre-history.[10] This is an anarchism-as-social-model, actually existing only in as much as the historical and ethnographic records are accurate or, more typically, in the sense that it is an actually existing topic of discussion. Brian Morris (2005), widely identified as an 'anarchist-anthropologist', indicates well the distance between *actual* and *projected* synthesis by carefully bracketing the latter as an elective affinity. Morris is also at pains to link the anthropology–anarchism association to a set of pre-anthropological considerations, through the work of Bakunin, in particular, as examples of theoretical (and political) endeavours to specify for modern human agents a mode of existence not subverted by mechanistic philosophy and other restraining devices incurred during the passage from 'primitive' to 'civilized' – with those terms carefully insulated by scare quotes – and expressed generally and generically as a holism within which theory and practice are one and the same. Once the holistic model of culture-as-system succeeded schemes such as Morgan's savagery–barbarism–civilization, it became possible to

speculate that the apparently disordered 'anarchy' of primitive existence was actually ordered.

The central reference for this idea of anarchism as a positive feature of pre-capitalist/pre-state society is Clastres' *Society Against the State* (1977), a volume which proponents claim authenticates a positive, anarchist reading of 'societies without governments'. Clastres' study of the Aché/Guayaki, has since served as the focal example of 'South American forest-dwelling, nomadic, hunter-gatherer society which represents an anarchist political order'. The scare quotes are stretched out that way in order to express the boundaries of material that has, almost by default, became the basis for a core model of 'indigenous Amazonian society' in which the Aché (despite being located at the extreme southern end of the culture area) are included.

Although Clastres was engaged in a specific debate concerning the determinative power of the economic in the last instance, the depiction of political power in small-scale forest societies is consistent with other analyses of Amazonian tribal politics that draw no analogies with anarchism. In fact, reference to Clastres' work by specialists is much more scant[11] than might be expected given its prominence in anthropology-and-anarchism discussions. As an example of anarchy in the raw, *Society Against the State* has occupied a unique position for 40 years, significantly, though indirectly, complemented by the popularity of such conceptual monuments as Lévi-Strauss's 'cold society' notion.

The intrinsic – and nominalist – anarchism attributed to such lowland South American societies may be challenged on many counts, but regardless of the adequacy of the anarchist characterization, a relatively unchallenged underlying assumption – and one crucial to the notion of an anarchist social formation attributed, perhaps overenthusiastically, to Clastres – is that the conditions of such societies as the Guayaki/Aché (or Akwe-Shavante, or the Trio, or indeed most of the celebrated examples of forest Indian societies) is an original condition, that is, that what was encountered by ethnographers represented a relatively well-preserved version of what had been typical for millennia. Sahlins, in *Stone Age Economics* (1972: 95–9) contributes significantly to the plausibility of this anarchist characterization in advancing the idea that the Domestic Mode of Production (DMP) represents an 'anarchist system' (although his aim is not so much to advance an argument about anarchism as to contest a Hobbesian characterization of primitive man/society as definitively nasty, brutish and short).

Objections to the idea that South American forest society politics represents an ur-anarchism may be based on several doubts. First, as noted above, is the shortage of support coming from other ethnographers of the region. Second is its questionable adherence to the romanticization of noble savagery. The third, and the most damaging, concerns the representativeness of contemporary societies in relation to their predecessors. It is explicit in the veneration of *Society Against the State* that if a society such as the Aché were demonstrably anarchistic, this tells us something important about the course of human history. Underlying that, however, is the

notion that such a society represents an original and typical condition of such forest-dwelling peoples, an assumption that looks less plausible now than perhaps it did in Clastres' time.

That textbook model of South American tropical forest sociality has been seriously challenged in a line of inquiry running from Nimuendaju (1949), through Lathrap (1970), into the more recent work of Roosevelt (1991), Neves et al. (2002) and Heckenberger (2005) and others. Perhaps Lathrap's overview is the most pertinent from the point of view of trying to characterize an anarchistic state of grace for such societies since he was among the earliest to argue that societies seized upon by modern anthropology as 'typically Amazonian' were in fact atypical: they represented societies – or better, fragments – either cast into the forest by proto-state formations that dominated the major waterways, or represented refugees of the great demographic collapse that accompanied what is mildly referred to as the 'Columbian exchange' (Crosby, 1972).

The point here is that the native anarchism of the forest tribe is not necessarily a pre-modern isolate, but more or just as likely a residue or after-effect either of retreat and decline in the face of more successful riverine chieftainships/proto-states or of the collapse of dominant societies in the face of European incursion. In either case the system aspect of forest Indian anarchism is problematically intrinsic to such societies. Where modern anthropology can be said to have conventionalized the notion of 'society without a state', Clastres' more emphatic 'society against the state' asserts something quite different: a society as prophylaxis against the rise of the state,[12] as though the only state in question is that held at bay by the local political configuration (the ur-anarchism) and not the state represented in the colonial domination of the region.

The fact that mounting evidence indicates that the social landscape of lowland South America was substantially different from the received view that has prevailed for most of the history of anthropological research in Amazonia does not undermine Clastres' (and many others') claims about a tribal mode in lowland South America in which communities are basically egalitarian and in which 'people had a high degree of control over their own lives and work activities' (Morris, 2005: 5), but it seriously undermines assumptions about what the broad political structures were. The absence of 'hierarchized and authoritarian relations of command and obedience' (Clastres, 1977: 9) may have been apparent among the Aché (and others), but the potency of the claim for an ur-anarchism significantly depends on the representativeness of that mode of control over coercive power, and in the line of revisionist critique running from Lathrap to Heckenberger, a very different kind of polity emerges.[13]

The main point so far has been to query some of the assumptions that seem to underlie interest in anarchism as the basis for an alternative model for society or merely as a starting point for anthropological inquiry. The romanticization of 'the Amazonian Indian' by Clastres, and more importantly by the many who cite his authority, likely overstates the degree to which an anarchist political order is immanent in lowland South America.

An anarchist anthropology or an anthropology of anarchism is basically an attempt to do something quite odd: anthropology – as an ideological science – is its own culture industry: it makes certifiable anthropology products, things, concepts by virtue of a form of socio-cultural accreditation (you have a PhD, a university position, a peer-reviewed reputation and so on); anarchism represents a political/moral stance which can't depend on such a form of accreditation. Like the Landless People's Movement, there is no membership card or secret handshake: membership is through doing. What does anthropological authority bring to the table/anarchist feast? Certainly there are interesting things to be learned from the study of anarchism, but in few respects is anthropology any more suited to studying anarchism than is any other field of endeavour, except in relation to what has been widely identified as an elective affinity between anthropology and anarchism based on a shared interest in supposed features of pre-state social formations, an affinity based on questionable anthropological generalizations about core features of pre-class societies.

There is one area, however, in which anthropology could have brought interest to bear on core issues of anarchism, but it has largely chosen to remain aloof from this area of inquiry, namely modern studies of the character of human nature advanced primarily through work in linguistic theory (and later, cognate fields of psychology and cognitive science).

The final example of a real, imagined or possible relationship between anthropology and anarchism is offered by Chomsky's discussion of human nature. Although Chomsky is at pains to discriminate between Chomsky the linguist and Chomsky the political commentator/analyst, the reasons for this do not lie in the irrelevance of his anarchism vis-à-vis his work in linguistics, but – as I understand it – from a desire not to use his authority in one field to valorize work in another.

There is a salient link between anthropology and anarchism that is provided in the theoretical linguistics pioneered by Chomsky, but it is one which has been largely sidelined as a result, speaking broadly, of the anthropological commitment to constructionism and disavowal of the direct relevance of innatist arguments developed under the influence of the Chomskyan revolution.

Exploring and justifying the implications of such a claim are well beyond the limits of this short article, so I confine myself to one aspect that has direct bearing on an imputed link between anarchism and anthropology.

The idea of human nature is awkward within a modern anthropological outlook in which adherence to cultural relativism (to varying degrees, in different ways, with varying levels of resolve) and constructionism requires a vigilant scepticism towards cultural universals or indeed, often, the idea of universals. Complementing that reluctance to devalue the differences among the epistemological demands of the many cultural regimes we know about is a critical posture towards science, positivism, universalistic claims and a host of other notions referred to by some/many as delusional meta-narratives.

No one knows what human nature is and disputes centring on the concept are now – under the influence of a genomic idiom still on the ascendancy – frequently depicted in terms of high-contrast, reductionist claims, that we are intrinsically selfish, for example, or we are intrinsically cooperative, claims exacerbated by the enthusiastic belief that a dog's dinner of fMRI scans, mirror neurons, phero-mones, gene-switching, etc. has edged us significantly closer to clarifying what it means to be human. The idea that a conclusive answer lies in one position or another – or elsewhere – is purely speculative, but there are other areas in which it is possible to be authoritative when it comes to distinguishing human nature from, say, bonobo nature or fruitfly nature, and that is with respect to the language faculty,[14] and it is in this regard that anthropological interest in anarchism seems to have missed a crucial opportunity. Chomsky's comments on creativity and freedom in relation to anarchism are closely bound up with conceptions of language capac-ity and human nature, but they seem to bear too great a cost in relation to anthro-pological defence of epistemological plurality (and, it would appear, ontological, as in the case of perspectivism). The resistance to the notion that the study of the social might take account of the biological is a hallmark of disciplinary disputes that have seen not only the weakening of already fragile ties within a four-field approach (which had, in any case, been little more than nominal for years), but a level of mutual demonization that is now institutionalized (e.g. the reciprocally dismissive postures of 'evolutionary psychology' and 'cultural anthropology').

The history of anthropological resistance to biologically reductionist, racist, eugenicist and crackpot genetic determinism is noble, well-established and vigor-ous, but to factor out anything which has implications for the biological basis of social behaviour in order to defend the field diminishes anthropological author-ity.[15] The close relationship between language and culture, for example, is a tenet of almost any anthropological position, but the conceit that the study of language may be contained within a cultural-social framework simply cripples the anthro-pological project. Chomsky's anarchism is meaningless without acknowledgement of the biological endowment as well as socio-historical formation of humans, but in the context of a discussion of anthropology and anarchism, there is an impediment generated within the discipline itself that forestalls fruitful engagement with these compelling arguments.

'Anthropology: Handmaiden of anarchism'?

A persistent question in considering the relationship between anthropology and anarchism concerns, as Robinson and Tormey (this volume) put it, anarchists' wish to defend both the potential and reality of anarchism, in substantial part by draw-ing upon anthropological accounts of stateless societies.[16] There seems to be a widespread assumption – perhaps more so outside of anthropology than in it – that the ethnographic record is replete with such resources. Robinson and Tormey themselves state that: 'Anthropology offers a rich reservoir of materials for approaching statelessness...', although, as the South American material indicates,

it may be dangerous to assume that statelessness is an original condition of anarchist grace. In addition to that caveat, however, the assumption that a 'rich reservoir of materials' provides an adequate basis for saying anything meaningful is not necessarily well-grounded. Offered up by Robinson and Tormey as an example of the exploitation of ethnographic material by an anarchist seeking indigenous material in order to critique 'dominant western conceptions' is a piece entitled 'A culture beyond time' in which the claim is made (apropos the Pirahã) that in the absence of recursion, numbers beyond three or so, absence of present and future tenses (claims made by investigator Everett, challenged by many, see Nevins et al., 2009):

> the Pirahã may have rejected the loss involved in the transition to civilization, and their existence as a lived alternative disproves 'the necessity of a civilized culture'.

It may be true, as Robinson and Tombey state, that '[A]narchists are here looking for evidence of alternative social logics and alternative ways of being in the world from the western liberal frame', but there is nothing particularly anthropological about the Pirahã work (except that they are exotic, Amazonian forest-dwellers, as though that itself qualifies this as 'anthropological' work). Additionally 'looking' is not the same as 'finding'. It is wishful thinking to claim that in such material 'Concrete examples of social life without the state and resistance offer potential models for replication.'[17]

There is a perhaps irresolvable contradiction in seeking to use anthropology – an unambiguously 'western conception' – in order to locate material that challenges 'the dominant system', and certainly in many of the examples adduced to show anarchists' search for evidence of alternative logics, the respectability offered by citing anthropological sources (as opposed, say, to *Ripley's Believe It or Not* or an equivalently dubious source) confers a sought-after authority. While it may be true that anthropology offers a critical repertoire to those seeking alternative forms of sociality, an anthropology configured as a collection of case studies of social isolates, bounded communities, peoples, tribes and other theoretically archaic units of analysis is barely recognizable as an anthropology of the 21st century.

Notes

1. This article is based on a text originally prepared for a workshop organized by Holly High in the Department of Anthropology, Cambridge, 22–3 September 2010.
2. My reservations at the time are continually reinforced: as anthropology has lost sight of a central project its character has become increasingly adjectival – the anthropology of this and that (from violence to celebrity to denim to just about anything), and the rising profile of anarchism seems to fit this profile. The problem with this strategy of trying to ensure the viability of anthropology by being open to applying it to just about anything (and it is largely a defensive strategy by way of insisting that anthropology 'has relevance') is that a theory (anthropology) that can do everything is not a theory, but – just to square the circle – a 'way of seeing'.
3. See his *Autobiography of a Catholic Anarchist* (1954).

4. In fieldwork, for example, approval of subjects' behaviour – beating children, felling ancient trees, pursuing near-extinct species, killing humans, etc. – isn't necessarily a corollary of pursuing research.

5. Joe Hill was a miner, Wobbly (Industrial Workers of the World) and songwriter who was fitted-up and executed (firing squad) in Sugar House Prison.

6. Phillips died in 2008, having made his living as a story-teller and musician.

7. This is not to say that he tried to discourage others from voting if they felt that appropriate: he ran under the Peace and Freedom Party banner in the 1968 elections, a gesture that led to his dismissal from his job as archivist in the state library and subsequent blacklisting.

8. Historical sources have also been influential, as in Morris's writing (2005) as well as Hobsbawm (1969) on banditry.

9. The anthropology referred to here is, I hope it is clear, academic anthropology as practised in – and for all practical purposes limited to – modern teaching and research universities. There are, of course, other anthropologies specified without reference to forms of academic recognition.

10. See, for the example, the review offered in Robinson and Tormey, this volume.

11. See, for example, and in a note that challenges Clastres' broad claims about political power, Gow (1991: 227–8).

12. This is entirely aside from the charge of projecting back into pre-history a notion of sociality that wasn't developed until the 19th century.

13. It is not a little ironic that the anarcho-anthropological gaze should be so resolutely turned toward a rather esoteric, Aché anarcho-primitivism in South America (and resolutely evolutionist, despite Clastres' declarations to the contrary) while Brazil currently embraces one of the most important and often anarchist-identified popular social movements in the world, and one far removed from the romantic anarchism attributed by Clastres to Amazonians, the Movimento Sem Terra – the landless people's movement – in which, in keeping with Ammon Hennacy's dictum, 'you vote with your body'.

14. And the implications such arguments have had for thinking around modularity.

15. Sperber (1982) long ago addressed the confusion surrounding normative versus epistemological relativism. See also Spiro (1986).

16. There is an unfortunate slippage in equating 'statelessness' with 'anarchy'.

17. And one suspects that Pirahã anarchism is going to be a hard sell: no counting, no future.

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