Taking the state back out and bringing anarchism back in. A review of George Lawson's *Anatomies of Revolution* (CUP, 2019).

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Abstract:

Anatomies of Revolution heralds an important new approach to the study of revolutions. This set of remarks focuses on the way in which Lawson's definition of revolution, as a process of contested dual sovereignty, excludes the revolutionary anarchist tradition. Bringing anarchism back in, and taking the dual sovereignty back out, opens up the study of revolutionary social process in ways that are congruent with Lawson's overall method, but challenge its somewhat conservative politics.

Keywords: Revolutions; anarchism; modernity; dual sovereignty; the state; capitalism; International Relations

Anatomies of Revolution displays all the academic virtues. It is theoretically and meta-theoretically astute, historically rich, engages respectfully with the established and competing methodological approaches to the topic, and diligently engages the existing literature. For a non-specialist, like me, Lawson's generous engagement with the study of revolutions is reassuring. His intellectual capaciousness, and the pioneering of a fifth generation of revolutions studies, will no doubt draw in new scholars, and embed revolutions and world history more firmly into IR.

But for all its appeal to Marx, indeed, perhaps because of it, Lawson advances and defends a quite conservative theory of revolutions, one which is methodologically and normatively statist. In other words, if the revolutionary groups are not concerned with capturing state power, they do not feature in the analysis. What concerns me in particular is the absence of the anarchists and anarchism in the analysis. This omission is not explicitly by design, but more likely a consequence of Lawson's methodology and definition of revolutions. I'm not going to pursue the 'Reviewer Three' strategy of wishing the author had written a different book. Rather, I hope my comments and suggestions illuminate the text from a different angle and, by exploring the limitations of the book, perhaps point beyond the fifth generation of revolution studies to a sixth. The aim is to draw in anarchist scholars and scholars of anarchism to this debate, as well as alerting students of revolutions to the existence of anarchist scholarship on this topic.

So how does Lawson define a revolution? Revolutions are primarily aimed at delegitimising the state's use of violence, creating a condition of 'dual sovereignty', which thereby also legitimises revolutionary violence or non-violence (Lawson 2019: 82). The contestation of sovereignty, whether by violent or non-violent means, is key. As Lawson puts it: 'a revolutionary situation is defined by a regime and an opposition advancing competing, but exclusive, claims to the same polity.' (Lawson 2019: 102). Success or failure depends on the working out of this dual or multiple claim to who gets to be sovereign. Drawing on Eric Hobsbawm, Lawson argues that 'the minimum condition for revolutionary success is the takeover and establishment of state power or its equivalent by revolutionaries.' By contrast, '[t]he maximum condition of revolutionary victory', is the 'institutionalisation' of what Hobsbawm called "a new framework for historical development" (Lawson 2019: 88).

The assumption is that unless you have sovereign power a transformation in the mode of production is unlikely, if not impossible. Likewise, it goes without saying that any movement that seeks neither to legitimise its violence by appeal to sovereignty, or refuses to contest political power through the institutions of the state, in order to take control of that state, falls outside Lawson's purview. Put differently, they are not *revolutionary*. Given the place of revolutions in world history, Lawson thereby effectively writes anarchists, and the anti-statist revolutionaries they have influenced, out of the modern era.

For those that have surveyed this debate before, the reasons for this omission are conventional and twofold. First, anarchism barely features in the canon of sociology, despite the fact that the anarchists were arguably instrumental in the establishment of sociology as a field of study (Williams 2014, Purkis 2018). Like in Geography, IR (Springer 2014, Prichard 2011), and elsewhere, anarchist theorists were slidelined when their theories and politics were insufficiently statist. While Lawson makes significant strides here, including 'the international' and challenging the Eurocentricity of conventional analysis (Lawson 2019:61-71), he nevertheless remains wedded to a very statist sociological methodology.

The second issue, which clearly links to the first, is the historical and lingering antipathy Marxist social theorists have for anarchist theory (see Prichard et al 2012, Prichard and Worth 2018, Prichard and Worth 2020). For example, where Lawson does engage with anarchistic revolutionary tendencies, he echoes Hobsbawm's criticisms of the anarchist left during May '68 (see, Chomsky and Hobsbawm, 1973). While Hobsbawm was impressed by the grass roots anarchist militants of the Paris general strike, which caught the Marxist left so woefully off-guard, they were only the impetus, the brawn, the heart, but lamentably, he remarked, not the brains of the movement. For Hobsbawm, their failure to capitalise on events in May '68 were

a function of anarchism's immature theory and inability to direct a working class movement towards the capture of state power. Lawson echoes Hobsbawm in his analysis of the Occupy Wall Street camps, La Via Campesina, what he calls 'the postmodern' and post-statist left, including Subcomandante Marcos and the EZLN in Chiapas, Mexico, and Anonymous (Lawson 2019: 231). Like Hobson before him, what they lack is a clear theory, strategic political action and a political, as in state-facing, project. They also display a misplaced faith in 'voluntarism', and prioritise protest over challenging for dual sovereignty, unable to 'scale up' their activities (Lawson 2019, 232-234). It is interesting that Lawson places Podemos, Syriza in this camp too, despite the fact that they are barely revolutionary, and Like Sanders and Corbyn, indeed most Marxist revolutionaries, have tried and failed to change the world through the institutions of the nation state.

So, what's the problem here? Let's return to prefiguration, a concept central to anarchist theory. Prefiguration is a theory of ethics, and social and revolutionary agency, which posits that means and ends are mutually constituted and so must be consistent with one another (see, Franks 2006, Gordon 2019, Van der Sande 2013 for recent discussions). To put it crudely, Leninist consequentialism presume the ends justify the revolutionary means, while liberal Kantian deontology presumes the ends will emerge out of divining and then institutionalising the correct moral principles. The latter is imperialist, remaking the world in its own image, the former is morally bankrupt. By contrast, being and instituting the change you want to see in the world, and accepting there is and can be no final point of moral, political or other authority, is an anarchist virtue ethics (Franks 2010).

Having studied the failings of the French Revolutions (e.g., Kropotkin 1909, Proudhon 1989/1851), anarchists came to reject the revolutionary strategy of seeking to capture the state

in order to advance the revolution, on the basis that to do so would entail the reinstitution of violence, domination and hierarchy that the anarchists sought to remove from society in the first place. Law, as Proudhon (1998/1861) put it, is dependent on force, and the institutionalisation of a revolutionary order necessarily entails the establishment of new laws by force (assuming there will always be dissenting minority, perhaps majority cleavages). But if law is to have any independent normative force, and society is to be classless, then to use military or paramilitary power to enforce it would suggest two things. First that the normative force of law is undermined by the institutions which defend it, and secondly that it imposes and entrenches social conflict in the interests of those who define that order, who cannot ever truly be the working class governing itself, for as long as it does so through minority and relatively autonomous institutions like the state. In other words, from an anarchist point of view, the centralisation of the state and the institution of sovereignty are the problem, not the solution. This fact was not fully appreciated by Marx and Marxists, except by those dissenters who lost their heads for their efforts (this list is too long to put in parentheses. For a good discussion see Van Der Walt, 2011).

The problem, as Lawson and the anarchists recognise, is that 'more often than not revolutions lead to the formation of "garrison states"' (Lawson 2019: 89). These are states paranoid about internal division and external threat, and prone to reinforcing borders, walls, and exclusions, terrorising and murdering its citizens while pursuing endless wars with those who threaten them from without. Lawson radically underestimates the 'millions' of deaths this has led to since 1789. Since 1917 alone, maximal estimates of direct and indirect deaths from revolutionary communist policies put the total somewhere between 90,000,000 and 100,000,000 (Courtois 1997). The fascist counter revolutions this often provoked were responsible for far more than 60,000,000 though there may be some double counting between

1939-1945. Nevertheless, this mass slaughter puts into perspective the handful of acts of deadly terrorism by anarchists between the 1880s and the 1910s (the seminal work is Jensen 2013).

Liberal states are hardly absolved here. Indirect deaths from what Galtung has called structural imperialism (Galtung 1971), from the structural adjustment programmes and debt traps of the Bretton Woods era (Chossudovsky 1991), do not match the communist or fascist totals. Indeed, rising literacy, declining poverty and violent death rates, as well as advances in medical science, suggest, as Lawson puts it, that liberalism may be the past 100 years' most revolutionary movement (Lawson 2019: 227). But as I have argued elsewhere (Baron et al, 2019), to understand the scale and scope of violence in modern society we have to look to the phenomenology of liberal pacification more broadly, and doing so makes revolution, understood as contesting dual sovereignty, even more unrealistic and unlikely.

Society is no less ruled by force if those that hold the guns don't actually shoot. Pacification by direct and indirect threats of violence are ubiquitous in modern states. But what if the threat is no longer explicit, but woven into the fabric of society. Systems of consumerism and exploitation, policing, cultural regimes of domination, the surveillance state, institutionalised, intersecting, but no less enforced norms of white supremacy, class power and patriarchy, all structure society mainly without the explicit, direct or indirect threat of violence. These forms of violence are internalised by populations as the normal workings of that society, and the elite bargaining supposed to resolve these issues is sanctioned by periodic bouts of democratic effervescence. As Lawson puts it in another memorable phrase, "[d]emocracy anesthetises revolution" (Lawson 2019: 228). But this anaesthetic inevitably wears off, leading to what Fanon called eruptive 'manias' (Fanon 1969), precisely because the means of violent revolution no longer make strategic sense – if they ever did – and the ballot box returns so little change.

The urgency for change can be seen in the uprisings worldwide, and their lack of mainstream political programme clearly indicates their disillusionment with mainstream politics. From Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter and onwards, disengagement from the constitutional procedures of liberal democracy is not apathetic, but strategic (Kinna, Prichard and Swann 2019). Anything short of a 'new framework for historical development' is not a revolution at all. But to seek to achieve it by the traditional means would seem pure folly, strategically, and utopian if it is pursued non-violently. Marxist accounts of revolution, violent or non-violent, cannot point to any other way, this makes them unrealistically utopian.

But there is an alternative – we just have to recognise it. For example, what if we begin with the anarchist approach to the French Revolutions, rather than the Marxist (Kropotkin 1909, Proudhon 1989/1951), and rather than start with Lenin, what about periodizing the Russian Revolution from the Krondstadt uprising? Perhaps we could study Ukraine during the Mahknovist revolt against Lenin and Trotsky (1917-1920) rather than the end of the 20th century (Shubin 2010. Cf. Ishchenko 2020). What if we study the anarchists' roles in the Chinese revolution, their links to the Korean and Japanese anarchists, rather than focus excessively on the emergence of the Communist Party (Dirlik 1991, Hwang 2010, Evren 2012)? With 250,000 in Argentina's anarchist *Féderacion Obrera Regional Argentina*, and over 200,000 across Cuba's anarchist unions up to 1920, not to mention the IWW's influence in Chile and Peru, the anarchist left was the revolutionary labour movement in Latin America before WWII (Van der Walt and Hirsch 2012: xli-xlii). It is depressingly conventional that Lawson should categorise and discuss the Spanish Revolution as a civil war (Lawson 2019: 32, 92), even though it was an anarchist-inspired and led revolution in response to a military, fascist and monarchist uprising against the republican state (until Stalin got involved, at which point

the anarchists were doomed). Not only is Ricardo Flores Magon overlooked in Mexico, but the non- or anti-statist revolutionary movement in Chiapas, fronted by Subcomandante Marcos seems to be too incongruous for Lawson's theory of revolutions (Lynd and Grubacic 2008). And finally, Rojava, the region in North Eastern Syria/South Western Turkey, which has instigated a social revolution since 2011 unparalleled for the region in modern times, doesn't even get a look in (Abdullah et al 2016).

But what role could these movement have today, and what lessons do they have for students of revolutions? These are movements which seek, through a plurality of means, violent sometimes, but predominantly non-violent and community led, to 'change the world without taking power', to cite the title of Holloway's famous work (Holloway 2002), and to 'build the new in shell of the old' to quote the slogan of the Industrial Workers of the World, a revolutionary syndicalist union in existence since 1905. Anarchist movements continue to shape and direct social movements and protest groups, shaping global discussions in ways mainstream politicians fail to do. Likewise, the innumerable mutual aid groups that have sprung up during the pandemic (Solnit 2020), as the did in response to other natural disasters, step in when states fail. Anarchists shape mainstream union strategy through 'dual carding', where anarchists take prominent, but non-factional organising roles in mainstream unions (Ribera-Almandoz et al 2020), building class consciousness from the ground up, as opposed to leading from a vanguard (though these lines can sometimes be blurred).

These are sensible strategies and tactics born of a deep understanding of the nature of state power and capitalism, the course of world history, and the experiences of violent repression. With tens of thousands of labour disputes in China in the past decade, it is clear that this is where social change will emerge there too, not through a direct challenge to the power of the

party (Estlund 2017, O'Brien and Li 2006). Indeed, it would be foolish for revolutionaries to try anything different given the scale of the surveillance state, the weaving of the Party into almost every aspect of social life, and organised state violence in China today.

If, by Lawson's criteria, this 'small-a' and self-consciously 'capital-A' anarchism (see Graeber 2002. Cf. Van der Walt and Hirsch 2012) is in fact reformist, I for one would be happy to adopt that moniker for myself and carry on regardless. I have suggested (but more remains to be said), that this reformism is the only possibility for immanent/imminent or prefigurative revolution. Empirically or objectively, given the dwindling numbers that identify in this way, it's all that's possible in the current context anyway. But giving this approach its due would also allow us to bin the transcendent, history-transgressing eschatology of the mainstream revolutionary left once and for all (see Davis 2012). Working tirelessly in our homes, communities and places of work for the changes we wish to see in the world becomes irresistible, and also the precondition of any challenge to the status quo. Linking up these movements, rather than scaling them up, is precisely what Lawson characterises as 'realistic utopianism' (Lawson 2019: 246. Cf. Prichard, Kinna and Swann 2019), where revolution is understood 'as a process rather than outcome' (Lawson 2019: 247). But relegating this anarchistic approach to revolutions to the final pages of the book does not do it the justice it deserves. Perhaps, however, this is the preface to the 6th generation of revolution studies.

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