Anarchists Have Forgotten Their Principles
Errico Malatesta (Freedom, November 1914)

The federalist idea leads logically to internationalism, the organisation of nations on a federal basis into the "large fraternal union of mankind". Bakunin showed up the bourgeois utopianism of a federal idea not based on international and revolutionary socialism. He called for and desired a "United States of Europe" as the only way "of making a civil war between the different peoples of Europe impossible" while issuing a warning against any European federation based on states "as they are presently constituted". "No centralized, bureaucratic and hence military State, albeit called a republic, could enter seriously and sincerely into an international federation. By its very constitution such a State will always be an overt or covert denial of internal liberty, and hence, necessarily, a permanent declaration of war, a menace to the existence of neighbouring countries".

True internationalism rests on self-determination, which implies the right of secession. Following Proudhon, Bakunin propounded that "each individual, each association, commune or province, each region and nation, has the absolute right to determine its own fate, however it will, or break any alliance, without regard to so-called historical claims." Anarchists did not regard this principle as leading to secession or to parceling out the earth. They only conceive a solution that "once the right to secede is recognised, secession will, in fact, become impossible because national units will be freely established and no longer the product of violence and historical falsehood".

Proudhon distinguished the unit "based on conquest" from the "national" unit and saw that "every organisation which exceeds its true limits and tends to invade or annex other organisations loses in strength what it gains in size, and moves towards dissolution". Bakunin declared that "equality for any nationality organized against any form of oppression", believing every people had "the right to be itself and no-one is entitled to impose its costume, customs, its language, its opinions or its laws." However Bakunin also believed that there could be no federalism without socialism and wished that national liberation could be achieved "as much in the economic as in the political interests of the masses". Any revolution for national independence "will necessarily be against the people...if it is carried out without the people and must therefore depend for its success on a privileged class". The national question is historically secondary to the social question and salvation depends on the social revolution. An isolated national revolution cannot succeed. The social revolution inevitably becomes a world revolution.

Anarchism
Daniel Guerin 1970

Wales has never constituted a sovereign political state and unlike Scotland does not have its own legal system. It's early history shows a region divided into a number of warring princedoms which since the departure of the Romans in the fifth century had enjoyed some independence, having their own princes and developing their own church, law and language. This shared culture began to end with the Norman penetration of Wales from the 1090s onwards which ended with the final conquest of Gwynedd in 1282. The following period saw English rule established with the first Prince of Wales being crowned in 1302 by Edward the First. To the Welsh 'Marches' was now added the 'Principality'. Sharing certain hierarchal aspects of the feudal system, reliance depended on the leadership of the Uchelbwy, the influential descendants of earlier princes and chieftains. By the end of the 14th Century the combined effect of heavy taxes and levies and the policy of English Kings to exclude the 'Uchelbwy from holding important positions in the Principality eventually led to the last uprising of the Welsh against the English.

The 1300s were the time of the 1st and 2nd Wars of Independence in Scotland and a period during which the culture and power of Brittany (a land sharing much in common with Wales) was at its height. Both lands fought wars with more powerful neighbours intent on conquest - why not Wales? Were there, in reality, no common culture and interests to defend?

The Beginnings of Welsh Nationalism

Many nationalists see the uprising of Owain Glyn Dwr as 'having no parallel in Welsh history'. Glyn Dwr was a Marcher lord and descendent of the royal families of Powys adn Dyfed. He led an army of about 10,000 in a revolt which began in 1400 and lasted until 1412. It begin in a dispute over land with an Anglo-Norman neighbour and its anti-Englishness attracted a cross section of society including both peasants and class enemies like the clergy. He convened a Parliament in Machynllyth in 1404 and captured land as far east as Worcester by 1408 but was slowly driven back into the fastnesses of Gwynedd and reduced to guerilla warfare, disappearing in 1412. While Glyn Dwr's revolt achieved a 'national focus' and extent, there is no evidence he wanted to create a separate Welsh nation. Rather he hoped for autonomy from the English crown and an end to anti-Welsh laws. Little was achieved for the poor who supported the uprising but the nobles gained much, abandoning Glyn Dwr in return for hegemony over Wales. The best example is Henry Tudor who was crowned king of England in 1485 despite the fact that his family, the Tudurs of Anglesey, had supported Glyn Dwr. The Act of Union of 1536 made Wales officially a part of England with English its language.

Revolution & Reform

The national question dropped from Welsh political history and not even the republican and nationalist ferment of the late 18th Century (in the colonies of Ireland and the New World) reignited it. The Welsh ruling class continued to side with the Crown, supporting the Royalist side in the Civil War and benefitting greatly from the association.
The divergence in the interests of the ruling and working classes of Wales and the impact of land reform and the beginnings of the Industrial revolution inevitably stimulated working class consciousness. Rather than struggling over land, a source of nationalist unrest in Ireland, rebellion in Wales centred on high rents, toll charges and wage cuts. The best examples of this are the Rebecca Riots (unfortunately split on class lines as landowners condemned the landless labourers who took up the fight), the Merthyr Rising of 1831 (the first time the Red Flag was raised but also when one of Britain’s first working class heroes, Dic Penderyn, was hung for his part in the rising) and the Chartist movement of the 1840s. All of these were based around political and social reform located in if not led by the working class and none had anything to do with Welsh nationalism.

Is nationalism solely a vehicle for local bourgeois leaders to improve their conditions vis-à-vis a collaborative group or a colonial or imperial state?

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State and Nation

Rudolf Rocker said, “it is the state that creates the nation, not the nation the state” and this appears especially appropriate when applied to Wales. Throughout its history Wales has been defined by those in power, it’s conquerors, not by the Welsh themselves. This has enabled nationalists to create a number of myths to support claims for independence, confusing nationalism (a product of state action) with nationality (a product of social processes) in a dangerous way. Wales has a rich and diverse culture and history which does not fit into the narrow constraints of nationalism; there has never been one Wales with a unified history. What is Welsh culture, the Eisteddfod or Catatonia? Is it a thing only definable within the Welsh language? So is Wales really an ‘oppressed’ nation? The Welsh working class have been oppressed as the working class in all countries have been. Fellow countrymen, the Welsh ruling class, have been the cause of much of this oppression.

Anarchism In Latin America

The countries of Latin America were related to Spain and Portugal by common cultural and linguistic ties and similar social conditions. The earliest anarchist groups appeared in Mexico, Cuba, and Argentina in the 1870s, stimulated by immigrants from Europe and the work of Italian anarchists. There was a Bakuninist League in Mexico City in the 1880s. Anarchists were active in organizing craft and industrial workers and most trade unions were anarcho-syndicalist. The success of the SpanishCNT was a great inspiration and there was much exchange of ideas and organisational experiences during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The FORA had 250,000 members and from 1902-09 waged a long campaign of strikes against employers and anti-labour legislation and played a significant role in the revolutionary period following the fall of the dictator Porfirio Diaz in 1910. There was a strong industrial, urban and intellectual bias to anarchism in the region but also a powerful agrarian anarchism, a levelling movement of great strength. Some of the leaders of the urban proletariat established strong links with the Zapatista movement which was extremely idealistic and egalitarian, insisting the people take the land and govern themselves in village communities without politics or the corrupting influence of personal ambition and gain, a vision closely allied to the rural anarchism of Andalusia in Spain.

What conditions encourage revolutionary rural movements, including expropriation of land and self-government?

Nationalist support in the 1960s forced the Labour Government to establish a Welsh Office with its own seat in Cardiff and to grant a Welsh Language Act. Bi-partisan support led to a devolution referendum in the 1970s in which there was a 4:1 vote against. The ‘No’ vote was championed by the Labour Left (Kinnock, for instance, was active in the ‘No’ campaign), in fear that the working class would be divided and Labour MPs lose to an Assembly. Additional factors were disillusion with the Labour Government and the fact that the new bureaucracies created would inevitably be paid for by working class taxes. This killed off devolution until the long winter of Thatcherism after 1979 – the local political elites saw their power-base destroyed as they were rendered impotent and chose devolution as a means to get back into control. This cynical manoeuvre possibly explains the low turnout and the wafer-thin majority for an Assembly – just 60,000 votes. An alienated and demoralised working class stayed home, removed by the urgings of liberal middle class leaders or the ‘tribunes’ of the working class who had so conspicuously shifted them.

With only 25% of the electorate voting ‘Yes’, the key question is why was the question put in the first place, in particular at a time of growing Blairite centralization. One reason is the extremely limited membership of the Assembly, the £2.5bn annual block grant is largely already allocated by central government. This pseudo-democratic reform has been ‘fixed’ in the interests of big business and the political establishment (including the trade unions). The absolute shambles of electing representatives to the Assembly is revealed by the power of the non-elected agents of big business directly co-opted onto its industrial and economic committees. The Assembly will fast-track decisions on corporate grants and planning procedures. As all the parties are pro-capitalist and dedicated to a neo-liberal market philosophy, the lot of the working class in Wales is unlikely to change. Government will remain the shadow cast by big business and 50% of the population will continue to own just 7% of the wealth.

Knowing this, why did groups and parties of the so-called Left such as the Welsh Communist Party, Socialist Alliance, Socialist Labour Party etc actually bother standing in the election when even if they had won seats the would have been powerless? This is a major question for electoralism has always been periodically attractive to those who profess a commitment to radical change. Elections are seen as useful vehicles for spreading propaganda, even the dated labourist propaganda of the ‘left’ groupings. Such electoralism reveals in no uncertain terms the paralysis and reformism of supposedly ‘progressive’ Marxist, Socialist and Trotskyist parties.

Workers who refuse to join their groupings (for good reason) must be manipulated by leaders, their demands mediated for their own good by democratic processes. Assemblies are places where the game of politics is played out, where rival elites compete for power. Elections offer these group the (spurious) opportunity to differentiate themselves from each other and raid the constituencies other groups command. This was particularly apparent within New Labour. Rhodri Morgan was blocked for the leadership in the Assembly by the trade union barons and the voice of the rank-and-file excluded.

THE WELSH ASSEMBLY

Towards An Assembly

Alan Michael was the visible expression of the Blairite iron fist in a velvet glove and a naked demonstration of where power in the party lies – in London. The sight of Morgan’s supporters outside the headquarters of the T&G begging for "one person, one vote" encouraged Plaid Cymru and other groups into believing the working class vote could be split off and realigned with themselves but without success. The tendency of such groups to blame the leadership of the trade unions for the situation of the working class serves to reveal their desire to become leaders themselves. They have no real wish for dialogue with the working class (which is a claimed purpose of elections and democratic structures) and fail to understand education can only come from the process of actual change, in the transformation of reality.

Possible Reading

Wales, Class Struggle & Socialism by C.Kimber. SWP pamphlet 1999

Haline Statler from Direct Action #7 Summer 1998

The Scottish National Party & Plaid Cymru in Against Parliament, ACF pamphlet 1997

Theos on the Welsh National Question, Workers Power 1996