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Writing Anarchism with History from Below

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks to the writing strategies and scholarly expectations of 'History from Below' to help develop anarchist historiography. These radical historians stress six major elements necessary to engaging past radical movements: voice, agency, sources, responsibility, care and accuracy, and democratisation. Radical historians also offer models of connecting individuals, groups, and larger structural levels of analysis. Consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of writing history from below can suggest politically and intellectually useful practices to scholars of anarchist history.

Keywords: *history, scholarship, anarchism*

INTRODUCTION

In her 2012 collection of essays on anarchist scholarship, Ruth Kinna asks, 'What constitutes *anarchist* research?'(p4, italics in original). What does anarchist research need in order to be fully adequate to its material? Is there, Kinna (p8) asks, 'a specifically anarchist historical theory and practice'?

Several scholars have recognised unfortunate practices in anarchist historiography. David Goodway (1989, p6) regrets past tendencies toward hagiography and antiquarianism, and numerous other scholars agree. In an essay published twenty years after Goodway's book, Stevphen Shukaitis (2009, p169) similarly warns against contenting ourselves with 'a strange web of self-referentiality and endless rehashing of the deeds and ideas of bearded nineteenth-century European males'. James Yeoman, in his fascinating study on *Print Culture and the Formation of the Anarchist Movement in Spain 1890-1915* (2020, p276), comments that 'a fastidious reading of anarchist theory' is not enough for a good analysis. Similarly, Kinna and Alex

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Prichard (2009, p271) warn against 'an endless celebration of a few de-historicized and de-contextualized principles'.

All these scholars and many more register their fatigue with past studies of great thinkers and big ideas, and welcome fresh approaches to anarchist history. But where should we look for better methodologies? In this essay I look to the rich practices of scholars whose work is gathered up under the title 'history from below' for models for stronger anarchist histories. Also sometimes called radical historians or social historians, historians from below have been recognised as fellow travellers by some scholars of anarchism, yet to my knowledge there has not yet been a full meeting of the two research trajectories. David Goodway (1989, p7), for example, recognises the importance of social history yet finds 'anarchism has been largely overlooked by the new historians'. Davide Turcato (2007, p410) identifies similarities between the Italian anarchists he studies and the 'rebellious proletariat' studied by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker in their history from below: both sets of radicals were 'many headed hydras' in that they appeared in multiple global sites and cannot be properly understood through a state-based framework of analysis. Carl Levy (2010, p2) observes the benefits of methodological cross-fertilisation with histories from below: 'By employing similar methodologies and asking similar questions about anarchism that have been posed in kindred fields of social, socialist, and labor histories, anarchism is no longer approached as a context-less, ahistorical study in social pathology'. Tom Goyens (2017, p8) usefully knits attention to details of urban space into his accounts of ideas and activists: 'Physical and social space is as much a player in the story of anarchism as are Most and Day'. Kenyon Zimmer further brings anarchist history together with history from below in his fine study of Yiddish and Italian anarchism in the US, *Immigrants against the State*. Zimmer (2015, p2) characterises his book as a 'social history of politics,' focusing on 'the worlds from which these radicals came, the worlds in which they lived, and the imaginary worlds they sought to build'.[1]

Recognising that social history has been largely inspired by Marxism, Goodway (1989, p7) leaves open the question, 'Do these Marxist origins and preoccupations invalidate social history for anarchists?' In my view, this question can only be answered through close analysis of the methodological toolkit employed by historians from below. Works that are far removed from the usual histories of anarchism can still usefully inform our approaches. Accordingly, the goal of this essay is to burrow deeply into some exemplary texts doing history from below in order to look at the specific tools they summon to vividly write radical past worlds. Anarchist historical scholarship is best served by developing the most useful and compelling methodological tools we can find, borrowing from whatever traditions recommend

themselves to our task. The purpose of my venture into some of the key texts of history from below is not to synthesise Marxism and anarchism, but to raid those texts for strategies that anarchist scholars could further put to work. While we are probably no longer in serious danger of having our history written entirely by our enemies, as Carl Levy (1989, p25) and others earlier warned, in struggling toward the best scholarship possible, we could still use some help from our friends.

This exploration of history from below engages two interconnected but distinct sets of writerly questions: First, how should we approach our research subjects? We are both listening for and helping to create the voices of those we study, recognising their (and our) active interventions in their worlds. The work entails finding and using relevant materials, with attention to the implicit points of view in the sources and the changing meanings of ideas across times and places. The research relationship raises questions of responsibility and inclusivity as we work out whom we are including and what debt we may owe them.

Second, how do we situate our subjects in relation to each other and their worlds? Here it is the scale of living and thinking that requires attention. Scientists and systems analysts often conceive of scale as micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis, best understood as porous, horizontally-arranged strata that interact dynamically with one another. The bottom layer consists of individual beings and things located in the concrete materiality of their specific stories; the middle layer consists of groups of people, places, thoughts and things, emergent communities created by and creating interactions and mediations; the top layer consists of the 'big picture', the long-term historical processes and structures framing individuals and communities, technologies and events. A micro-level focus foregrounds biographies, with group relations and social context in the background. A meso-level focus concentrates on the group level, with both specific individuals and larger social forces in supporting roles. A macro-level analysis foregrounds wide-angle historical forces, with groups and individuals included as illustrations of the larger picture. While I am temporarily separating these levels of analysis in order to think them through, they are intimately connected while not fully or precisely map-able to one another.

WRITING HISTORY FROM BELOW, PART I: APPROACHING RESEARCH SUBJECTS

Historians working from below generally express, not just sympathy for, but alignment with those with little power. Feminists call this critical solidarity (N. Dave 2012, p86). These texts are often written by scholars with one foot in the academy and the other in an activist world. In this paper I draw on these examples: C.L.R.

James' magnificent fury at the suffering of slaves and his towering indictment of class and colonial rulers in *The Black Jacobins*; the strange and wonderful rebellions of religious dissenters explored by Christopher Hill in *The World Turned Upside Down;* E.P. Thompson's remarkably detailed excavations of workers' struggles in *The Making of the English Working Class*; Natalie Zemon Davis's careful and compelling reconstruction of sixteenth century French village life in *The Return of Martin Guerre;* Carlo Ginzburg's imaginative exploration of the intellectual world of a sixteenth-century miller in *The Cheese and the Worms*; revolutionary circulations of sailors and slaves explored by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker in *The Many-Headed Hydra*; the successful slave revolt documented and analysed by Rediker in *The Amistad Rebellion*; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's startling historical ethnography of plants in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*; Ann Stoler's archival ethnography of fissures and layers of struggle among colonial authorities in *Along the Archival Grain*; Carolyn Eichner's reframing of the Paris Commune around women's revolutionary feminism in *Women in the Paris Commune;* Saidiya Hartman's (2019, pxiv) cultivation of a 'fugitive text of the wayward' to recognise young Black women as revolutionary actors in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments.* These exemplary texts struggle against the erasure of those with little power. How do they do it?

Following Marcus Rediker (17 January 2019), I identify six major writerly goals and practices crucial to creating a compelling and useful relation to those about whom historians write: voice, agency, sources, responsibility, care and accuracy, and democratisation.

Voice. There are at least three levels of voice requiring cultivation: first, detailed and accurate recovery and presentation of past voices, so that the people we study could recognise themselves in our accounts; second, careful analysis of the grammars and rhetorics used by our research subjects, clarifying their characteristic discursive practices; third, the crafting of our own voices as writers, with appropriate humility and confidence. Writing history from below entails not just writing *about* one's subjects, but engaging *with* them.

One important vehicle for such engagement is generous presentation of their words within our own text. E.P. Thompson exemplifies this approach in *The Making of the English Working Class* through his own substantial quotations from an enormous array of individuals. Yet extensive quotes are only the first step: Thompson does not just quote his sources, but he draws them into lively conversations. For example, speaking of Radical leader William Cobbett, Thompson (1963, p758) praises 'the democratic character of his tone'. Thompson is, toward his research subjects, as Cobbett was, toward his audience. Cobbett's thought was 'not a system but a *relationship*' (Thompson 1963, p758, italics in original). Both men

recognised and cherished the lively meeting of political leaders and their audiences, 'the flint and the steel' that 'brings forth the fire' (Cobbett, quoted in Thompson 1963, p758). Thompson's (ibid.) observation about Cobbett could also be our observation about Thompson: 'Few writers can be found who were so much the "voice" of their own audience'. While Thompson does not overlook the limitations of Cobbett's analysis, Thompson (p763, italics in original) both praises and emulates Cobbett's ability to '*grip* and *engage*'.

In *The Cheese and the Worms,* Carlo Ginzburg (1980, pxiii) also explores such engagements through his passion for his 'extraordinary protagonist': the literate and rebellious miller Menocchio. Ginzburg mobilises readers' emotions, bringing us into relation with his character sympathetically and respectfully. Ginzburg renders Menocchio vividly. The miller is stubborn, proud, doggedly independent; he comes alive, as Rediker (26 February 2019) notes, 'within the deep structure of peasant society but moving within it'. Ginzburg provides lengthy quotes from Menocchio's testimonies to the Inquisition, the letters and testimonies from priests and witnesses, the miller's doomed efforts to seek forgiveness for denouncing the rich and questioning the sacraments without actually retracting his ideas. Ginzburg makes imaginative use of the resources available to him, including trial records, correspondence, and the residue of popular culture, in much the same way that Menocchio utilised the political and religious resources available to him four centuries earlier. Ginzburg (1980, p16) notes that the rights Menocchio claimed were inspired by his god: 'A miller may claim to be able to expound the truths of the faith to the pope, to a king, to a prince, because he has within himself that spirit which God has imparted to all men'. We can say about Ginzburg what Ginzburg said about Menocchio: each man 'with rare clarity and understanding … articulated the language that history put at his disposal' (pxxviii, Preface to the Italian Edition). Ginzburg (pxii) is modest about his ability to re-present Menocchio's voice: 'we seem to know Menocchio,' Ginzburg suggests, 'but he also eludes us'. Yet despite the author's care to leave Menocchio unfinished in our accounts of him, we nonetheless receive the urgency of the miller's voice in something like the way that the officers of the Inquisition must have done: 'I beg you, sir, listen to me …' (p100).

Attention to the grammar and rhetoric of our subjects' texts brings the workings of genre into the mix. For example, in *The Amistad Rebellion*, Rediker unpacks the creation of a complex collective identity by the imprisoned Africans in a letter they wrote to their supporter (and former President of the United States) John Quincy Adams. While attributed to the young African boy Kale, the letter was actually a 'collective composition' (Rediker 2013, p181). The writers invented 'an unusual social formation' in the concept of 'the Mendi People', a 'complex compound for

which there was no precise equivalent in West Africa, not even in Mendeland' (ibid., p180). The white abolitionists championing the Africans' cause of emancipation and repatriation had insisted on Christianising and Anglo-phising the Africans, who cooperated with these demands by learning the new religion and language while at the same time creating a new way of being African. They invented 'a multiethnic entity, which included Mende, Temne, Kono, Gbandi, Loma and Gola people' (ibid.). 'The Mendi People' became the vehicle of collective self-identification through which the Africans could implicitly relate to, and claim parity with, 'the American people,' an equally invented site of sovereign aspirations. Employing idioms of personal friendship, individual rights, Christian morality, and collective struggle, this creative self-naming enabled the Africans 'to make three fundamental political demands: to shape their legal defense, to protect themselves against violence, and to insist upon their own rights to self-emancipation and ultimately repatriation' (ibid.). In a remarkably creative genre-shifting move, the Africans' recruited the vehicle of the written letter to their political project of return to an oral culture.[2]

Attention to the workings of voice, grammar and rhetoric among anarchists suggest similar inventions of fresh discursive practices. For example, several anarchist women created a modest genre of writing that Italian anarchist Leda Rafanelli named *social sketches,* brief texts that are a cross between essays and short stories, with 'wispy plots' but vivid characters and settings for the exploration of an idea or a problem (Pakieser 2014, p10). In addition, anarchists often used the vehicle of letters to express their political voices and to maintain personal bonds. In analysing their social sketches and their correspondence, scholars are not required to write in either genre, but we do need to figure out how their genres do the work of making meaning. Being receptive to our subjects' writerly voices requires us to be both attentive to and informed by the strengths and weaknesses of their genres. A conversational tone, such as Rediker uses in reconstructing the prisoners' letter-writing campaign, can invite readers' trust so they can enter into the life-world of the subjects and hear their voices.

Agency. There are at least two levels for considering agency in doing anarchist history: first, recognising research subjects as makers and bearers of change, and, second, reflecting on our own interventions as contributing, in perhaps unpredictable ways, to political fields. Attention to agency requires looking at the self-organisation of our subjects and cultivating receptivity to what people do on the ground to liberate themselves. For example, instead of the faceless mob as it appeared from the perspective of elites, E.P. Thompson brings us the conscious crowd. The aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and the military needed to see protesting working people as rabble; as Thompson slyly notes, elites 'were appalled and some were even panic-

stricken when they found that they were *not*' (Thompson 1963, p681, italics in original). Luddites, in Thompson's telling, are rescued from their usual confinement in the realm of 'blind protest' and reframed as 'shrewd and humorous ... capable of managing a complex organization' (p543). Their grievances were framed within a longing for the lost 'reciprocal obligations and duties' that 'were being snapped one after another' (p546). Yet Thompson resists concluding that the Luddites were reactionary; he insists that efforts to 'revive ancient rights' by looking back to the health of the guilds could also 'establish new precedents' by launching future struggles (pp550, 552).

Attention to agency is not solely the province of the human. In her creative ethnography and natural history of matsutake mushrooms, Anna Tsing (2015, p152) mobilises landscapes as 'radical tools for decentering human hubris'. 'Landscapes are not backdrops for historical action; they are themselves active', Tsing (p152) insists. Similarly, non-organic participants in political lifeworlds can be seen as engaging the movement's agentic field. The realm of technos, the human made and built world, mediates between social and natural worlds and among levels of organisation (Seaton 2005, p265). Humans join non-humans in shaping reciprocal encounters. In the anarchist movement, for example, printers often related to their presses as fellow activists, entities-in-relationship (Ferguson 2014). The movement's endless stream of written texts were not just *about* anarchism; they *were* anarchism, with the presses acting more like comrades than inert objects. The energy and skill that it took to produce and distribute those texts rebounded back and produced more energy and more skill to keep anarchism going.

Attention to agency also requires cultivating reflexivity as a writer and researcher. While generous use of quotations is a start, it is only a beginning, both because often subaltern research subjects have left few written records and because our writing does more than report on the ideas of others: we are making those ideas available in some ways rather than others, facilitating some liaisons while curtailing others. Ginzburg, Rediker (26 February 2019) observes, establishes his writerly authority, both chronological and thematic, by taking readers on 'a long walk through a maze'. The walk itself establishes Ginzburg's power to lead us through that maze. Saidiya Hartman (2019, ppxiii-xiv) calls her method 'close narration, a style which places the voice of narrator and character in inseparable relation, so that the vision, language, and rhythms of the wayward shape and arrange the text'. There is a great deal of respect, even fierce love, in the narrative proximity that Ginzburg and Hartman cultivate. Yet past voices are often elusive, and in any case are never fully ours.

Sources. Research requires identifying what counts as a relevant source and figuring out what to do with it. How does society produce documentation of

marginalised people? To get at what our research subjects thought and felt and said and did requires searching for fresh sources as well as reading familiar sources creatively. Historians from below often characterise this as reading against the grain, although sometimes reading alongside the grain can also illuminate.

Historians of anarchism are fortunate in that anarchists were by and large prolific writers: while there must have been many whose lives elude our records, anarchists produced many hundreds of journals, pamphlets, books, and posters as well as thousands upon thousands of letters. Most of the publications are now out of print but many have been preserved in a handful of libraries. A renewed interest in anarchism in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries has led to fortuitous re-publication of many classic books. At the same time, anarchists frequently came under the scrutiny of the authorities, resulting in extensive accounts by informers, undercover agents, police, and courts as well as mainstream media. Of course these sources are not innocent: they frame anarchists as always already the problem, never the solution. Governmental agents are to anarchists as the Roman Holy Office was to Ginzburg's miller: 'the institution whose insistence on a full recording of all events transpiring before its tribunal made the present study possible' (1980, pxv, translator's note). Excavating sources such as the FBI, like the Roman Holy Office, to illuminate the subjectivity and agency of marginalised people requires thinking against the familiar power relations in the documents; it requires getting inside what was thinkable and do-able for our subjects and becoming wary of static attributions. As Rediker continually insists, we must learn to listen, to cultivate curiosity, to read with the gift of wonder. Don't assume we already know what things mean.

To do this, Rediker (14 February 2019) counsels, one must inquire deeply: 'The more you know, the more you can imagine'. Sometimes the trail dries up. Thompson (1963, p497) insists that 'constructive speculation' is permitted, when direct evidence evaporates or reflects largely the interests of the ruling class, but the logic of people's suffering and resistance is nonetheless suggestive. Available evidence may be 'untidy' but 'the articulate culture of the working people' can nonetheless be found, for Thompson's nineteenth-century workers, in the 'tavern world', the 'trades club[s]', the publications, and the 'reading public' (pp585, 741, 612, 616, 674-676, 727). In the 'reading clubs and debating societies', and among the millenarian preachers 'in the fields and parks of London', Thompson (pp45, 48, 49) finds traces of 'how men felt and hoped, loved and hated, and of how they preserved certain values in the very texture of their language'. Rediker (13 March 2019) concurs, encouraging aspiring historians writing from below to 'tell the most probable story based on the best available evidence'. Hartman (2019, ppxiv, xv) similarly 'elaborates, augments, transposes, and breaks open archival documents so they might yield a

richer picture' of the dreams and rebellions of those who have been 'credited with nothing'. It is a risky way of writing, vulnerable to charges of romanticisation or nostalgia, yet offering the chance to write in ways that do justice to the fierce dreams and tough insistences of those largely out of reach of full documentation yet who refuse to be curbed or tamed.

Rediker and Hartman write vigorously against the archival grain: as Hartman (pxiv) remarks, she is 'untether[ing] waywardness, refusal, mutual aid, and free love from their identification as deviance, criminality and pathology'. Ann Stoler (2009, p50) takes a different tack: she suggests that, rather than reading against the grain, it is worthwhile 'to explore the grain with care and read along it first'. She offers two reasons to postpone what she characterises as the usual critical approach to archives: first, because reading against the grain approaches (or risks approaching) archives through an 'extractive' rather than an 'ethnographic' encounter (p47); second, because reading from below overlooks 'the unexplored fault lines, ragged edges, and unremarked disruptions to the seamless and smooth surface of colonialism's archival genres' (p52). With regard to the texts examined in this paper, Stoler's first fear is misplaced: these historians writing from below share Stoler's devotion to 'immersement in' rather than 'extraction from' their sources (pp47-48). They too dwell in archives rather than merely mining them. In contrast, Stoler's second concern is pressing for history from below because it raises an implicit question: *below what*? There are 'aboves' and 'belows' within the authorities' purview as well as between the elites and the non-elites. In Stoler's fascinating excursions into the self-understanding of the Dutch authorities in colonial Indonesia, confusions abound over the status of mixed-race persons, boys of Dutch parentage not returned to the Netherlands for school, Europeans who are poor or foot-loose, and others who confound colonial proprieties about how to do European-ness. Struggles within the dominant groups over how best to rule peek out through what Stoler (p53) calls 'the archive's granular rather than seamless texture'. Archiving is a process as well as a place to find sources. There is more than one way to identify and inquire into hierarchies of power.

Care and accuracy. Writing history from below requires attention to changing definitions of key terms; we cannot assume that words and ideas carry the same meaning now as they did in the past. While we often have great affection for our subjects, it is our persistent, respectful curiosity that takes us the farthest into their life worlds. Ginzburg (1980, pp31, 26) takes readers into Menocchio's 'extravagant cosmogony' of worms and cheese, god and breath, describing his subject's rejection of the authority of the priesthood as exhibiting 'moral and intellectual strength that can be described as nothing short of extraordinary'. Ginzburg

follows the documentation of Menocchio's explosive heresies with great care for detail, noting his subject's long pauses in response to some questions, passionate outbursts to others, chronicling the books he read (including the Bible in the vernacular, possibly the Koran) and the conversations he had. Like many curious and driven readers, Menocchio both used his texts and went beyond them (pp 48-49). Menocchio accessed books the way the poor often do: he participated in 'a network of readers who overcame the obstacle of their meagre financial resources by passing books to one another' (pp28-29). This 'lively network' included priests, other men and women in his village, and people whose lives were touched by a local school: 'it's astonishing', Ginzburg (p29) marvels, 'that so much reading went on in this small town in the hills'. This assemblage of readers and readings has implications not just for the people but for the things: 'Books were part of the daily life for these people. They were objects to be used, treated without excessive regard ...' (p29). Ginzburg (p31) seeks not just what Menocchio read, but *how* he read: his 'aggressive originality' interacted with the unconscious screen of the oral traditions of the countryside, which acted like 'a filter that emphasized certain words while obscuring others, that stretched the meaning of a word, taking it out of its context, that act on Menocchio's memory and distorted the very words of the text'. Ginzburg (p26) refuses static notions like 'personality' to understand Menocchio, instead asking how he came to be: 'The diffidence of his relatives and friends, the reproaches of the priest, the threats of the inquisitors, none had succeeded in shaking Menocchio's self-confidence. But what made him so sure of himself? With what authority was he speaking?' Of course this question of authority also loops back to Ginzburg himself, implicating the writer with the written.

Responsibility. Writing responsibly toward one's research subjects does not necessarily mean bearing the burden of continuing their perspectives and projects, but taps a larger sense of responsibility as the ability to respond to them, to their thoughts and feelings and actions, to their struggles and their worlds. Critical solidarity requires that, as Thompson (1963, p12) famously urged, we rescue them from 'the enormous condescension of posterity' and care about their passions and their fate. We must, as Thompson (p206) urges, 'make at least the imaginative effort to understand'. We lose sight of old ideals when their remembrance falls into the wrong hands: old radical ideas become, in Ginzburg's (1980, p77) lyric phrase, 'words that the passing of time have dulled, like coins that have passed through too many hands'. Yet, the passage of time can sometimes serve the purposes of radical recovery; in *The World Turned Upside Down,* Christopher Hill (1972, p16) notes, 'Each generation ... rescues a new area from what its predecessors arrogantly and snobbishly dismissed as "the lunatic fringe"'. The lunatic fringe can be re-enlivened, Natalie Davis (1983, p3)

remarks in *The Return of Martin Guerre*, by writerly projects 'to discover the world they would have seen and the reactions they might have had'.

Responsibility, the ability to respond, is not built on deference but on respect: as Davis (p3) notes about *The Return of Martin Guerre*, 'What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past'. The elusive lure of rebels from the past can provoke amplified moments of self-reflection. In her retelling of the famous story of the seductive peasant imposter Pansette and his wife, 'the self-fashioning Bertrande', Davis takes her readers with her to her sources and invites them to think with her and to draw their own conclusions (p118). As Rediker (21 February 2019) comments, Davis bravely 'fosters doubt about [her subjects'] knowability' while continuing to try to know them. Her book leaves us with the intertwined agency of author and subject: 'I think I have uncovered the true face of the past – or has Pansette done it once again?' (Davis 1983, p125). Like Pansette and Davis, our research subjects are engaged in potentially disruptive self-fashioning. So are we as scholars.

Democratisation. All people's experience matters. All people's desires matter (Rediker, 17 January 2019). Respect for the 'intelligence and moral passion' of those who suffered and struggled is critical to history from below (Thompson 1963, p832). As scholars, we acknowledge, with Christopher Hill (1972, p13), 'attempts of various groups of the common people to impose their own solutions to the problems of their time'. Many of the anarchists, like James' former slaves, Thompson's workers, Hill's religious rebels, Ginzburg's and Davis's peasants, and Linebaugh and Rediker's sailors, were gifted amateurs. Like Thompson's weavers, many were working class autodidacts. Like the sailors of the *Many-Headed Hydra*, they spoke their views to one another and found ways to write. Despite anarchism's lively print culture, some anarchists leave little or no written record of their own and have to be creatively imagined from the records of their oppressors, as Hartman (2019, pxiv) does when she 'exhume[s] open rebellion from the case file'.

Scholars writing from below find their way into the spaces where ordinary people think and act and create intellectual life. Thompson (1963, p291) takes readers to weaving communities where 'self-educated and articulate men of considerable attainments' had 'fruit, vegetables and flowers from their gardens', poets, musicians and botanists within their villages, and lively conversation with their fellows. Their way of life was considered backward by others, and its catastrophic destruction is often passed over as a moment of decline within an overall story of progress, but weavers fought for their communities and dreamed of their return. Thompson (1963, p802, italics in original) also illuminates the world of the impoverished followers of Robert Owen, whose 'communitarian yearning' was

at the same time their resource: 'the dream that, somehow, by some miracle, they might once again have *some stake in the land*'. Building the worlds of our research subjects through generous textual atmospherics makes the places and the people real (Rediker, 4 April 2019). Historians writing from below teach us to ask questions about the erasure or decline of communities: it is likely that they did not just fall apart, but rather they were defeated through ruthless repression. It is likely that not everyone and everything was obliterated: traces remain.

WRITING HISTORY FROM BELOW, PART II: LEVELS OF ANALYSIS AND INTERACTION

The interests of anarchist scholarship are best served by telling a good story. We take up, often, stories of immense struggles. Well-told, they will continue to have meaning. But what does it mean to tell them well?

We can think about this challenge in terms of proximity and scope, text and context, figure and field, surface and ground, what is brought forward and what is pushed back to make a compelling frame. We are telling big stories within small ones, and vice versa. The micro, meso, and macro levels need each other even though they do not fully integrate. We can think of levels as open-ended assemblages that are fluid, dynamic, and entangled. Their circuits of interactions, systems theorists tell us, host 'thresholds, lags and discontinuities. The feedbacks and feed forwards open up for surprises and non-intuitive behaviors of the systems (Liljenström and Svedin 2005, p1). Within and between each level are 'force fields' that actively organise available elements (Stoler 2009, p22). Traits of these fields of force include the capacity for self-organisation, emergence, feedback and feedforward loops, time delays, turbulence, amplification, attenuation and control (Liljenström and Svedin 2005, p3). Redundancies may make relationships adaptive, less vulnerable to disturbances, while capacities for self-organisation make order out of disorder, but also make relationships unpredictable (p4). The micro/meso/macro distinctions are layered interdependencies: there are always more micros 'below' us (for example, organs, bacteria, molecules), more mesos 'between' us, and more macros 'above' us. Decisions about microscopic, mesoscopic, and macroscopic elements depend on context. Every seeming top or bottom is, framed otherwise, a different middle.

My frame for thinking these levels draws on ecological rethinking of systems theories to amplify their dynamic entanglements. Participants are, as Anna Tsing (2015, p23) says about species, 'emergent effects of encounters'. Levels are related but 'cannot be reduced to the properties of the components at the underlying level' (Liljenström and Svedin 2005, p4). Thus they are not neatly scalable: there is no

single inductive or deductive logic to go from top to bottom or vice versa. Tsing (2015, p38) explains:

> Scalability ... is the ability of a project to change scales smoothly without any change in project frames. A scalable business, for example, does not change its organisation as it expands. This is possible only if business relations are not transformative, changing the business as new relations are added. Similarly, a scalable research project admits only data that already fit the research frame. Scalability requires that project elements be oblivious to the indeterminacies of encounter; that's how they allow smooth expansion. Thus, too, scalability banishes meaningful diversity, that is, diversity that might change things.

Without the assumption of scalability, there is no 'writ large' or 'writ small' default pattern. Lacking a single tool to skewer them all in place, there's really no way around getting to know the inhabitants of each level. Yet, it is hard to see all levels at once, which is why we tend to simplify surrounding levels to get at what is going on in any one level. Each level may be a frame for others, or a vague stimulus, or an interruption. Tsing (2015, pp158, 160) agrees with Rediker that the key to the work of understanding is active listening and noticing. Ginzburg's (1980, p154 fn 55) opinionated sixteenth-century miller, hungry to converse with authorities about his heretical desires for a new world (micro), moved within a surprisingly literate village and an ominous priesthood (meso), framed within the larger conflict between a rural oral culture and a dominant written culture (macro), locked into 'an unequal struggle, where the dice are loaded'. Ginzburg (pp55, 49) tells the story by tracing the multidirectional links among the micro/meso/macro relations: first, the obstinate miller; second, his mill, his village, and the surrounding social networks, the 'cultural relations and transmissions' connecting other readers, writers and interpreters; third, the Counterreformation, the changing peasant economy, the invention of the printing press, and the 'encounter between the printed page and oral culture that formed an explosive mixture in Menocchio's head'. The conditions of possibility regarding who can speak and what can be said emerge within the interstices of these layers.

A decade ago, Constance Bantman and David Berry (2010, pp1-2) identified three 'new methodological developments opening up new perspectives on the study of anarchism', that shed light on the three levels of analysis. The three trends in the 'new history' Bantman and Berry (p4) welcome include:

1. Transnational, global history that does not take national frameworks for granted;

2. Biographies and personal networks of historical figures; and
3. A new comparativism.

These 'new history' innovations intersect with the levels of analysis I am pulling from history from below. First, the transnational approach is a powerful methodological strategy to continually put pressure on the macro level of analysis to keep it from automatically defaulting to the state. Macro-level analyses can be grounded in, for example, patterns of immigration, language communities, urban areas, class structures, economic development, or regional geographies that provide a 'big picture' without naturalising the state. For example, Jennifer Guglielmo's lively account of anarchist women in Italian diasporic communities in Italy, the US, and South America in *Living the Revolution* (2011) is a powerful transnational analysis of anarchism as a moving way of life.

Second, placing biographies within their personal and political networks is a strategy that puts pressure on the micro level of analysis to keep it from defaulting to the 'great man' theory of history. For example, Ruth Kinna's innovative inclusions of dozens of biographies at the end of *The Government of No One* (2019) allows readers to position individual's life stories within a larger movement context, as does Paul Avrich's extraordinary collection of interviews in *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America* (1996). A focus on networks, as found in Guglielmo's *Living the Revolution* and Zimmer's *Immigrants against the State*, combines micro and meso levels of analysis, so that the relationship between individuals and the larger movements in which they operate is always foregrounded. The space for creativity available at the middle level, Carl Levy (2010, p16) has noted, allows scholars to develop 'larger mental maps' to chart their scholarly terrain. Levy (p16) suggests:

> The three most relevant fields of study are the political cultures forged from occupational groups (miners, landless laborers, seamen, lumberjacks, tailors, as examples), suburbs or districts of cities (Barcelona, Turin, Buenos Aires, Tampa, Paterson, among others), and diasporic communities (Italians, Jews, and others).

No doubt other meso-level networks could be identified and foregrounded as new aspects of anarchist movements become discernable through fresh mapping.

Thirdly, an invigorated comparative approach can help at all three levels of analysis by finding similarities and differences across places and times, anchoring them in their specific locations while enabling them to travel. For example, several of the essays in Berry and Bantman's 2010 collection, *New Perspectives on Anarchism,*

Labour and Syndicalism, compare relations among anarchism and syndicalism in different countries or regions. Zimmer compares Yiddish and Italian anarchist communities in the US in *Immigrants against the State*, allowing similarities and differences to emerge. In sum, paying attention to the levels of analysis implicitly foregrounded in a study, and constituting them in terms of their relations with one another rather than as isolated layers, can expand available angles of vision for understanding what anarchists did and how they did it.

Considering how we write the different levels of analysis is an essential part of writing about anarchism as a *movement,* not just a few heroic individuals or big ideas. Carolyn Eichner (2004, p2) addresses this problem in her study of women communards by selecting 'three distinctly different revolutionary women leaders, Andre Léo, Elisabeth Dmitrieff, and Paule Mink, each of whom exemplifies a particular strand of communarde feminist socialism'. While other women's contributions are noted, these three women emerge as 'exemplars and embodiments of various politics', while simultaneously providing stories for critical interrogation (pp8-9). Eichner echews the better-known Louise Michel in her account because so many prior studies take Michel to be representative of all the revolutionary women, thus 'reduc[ing] them to a type' (p6). But does selecting three women to exemplify the rest run that same risk? How many would be enough? E.P. Thompson's weighty tome goes to the opposite extreme, presenting a monumental array of actors, leaving the non-specialist reader flipping desperately through pages to recall identities of people, places and events. If you present more than a handful of individuals, how can readers keep them straight?

As noted above, Thompson individualises his people with lengthy quotations from original sources, presenting their words in their own voices (or as close to their voices as Thompson can take us). For example, Thompson (1963, pp199-202) reproduces from the journal *Black Dwarf* the extensive and cogent public remarks of 'A Journeyman Cotton Spinner' in Manchester in 1818 to individualise the speaker and press home his passionate call for independence and justice. Yet the sheer volume of speakers, each as determined as the next to communicate their indignation, their entreaties, and their despair, blurs them. Out of respect, Thompson (p592) largely refrains from resituating his subjects into someone else's grand narrative: 'For those who live through it, history is neither "early" nor "late". "Forerunners" are also the inheritors of another past. Men must be judged in their own context ...' Yet, what context is properly reconstructed as their 'own'?

It is a daunting challenge to pay close-to-equal attention to each of these levels of analysis. Perhaps it is not necessary to do so, but omissions and selections have consequences. In *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James tells a compelling story of exploitation

and rebellion, courage and treason, multiple invasions and shifting alliances in the Haitian Revolution, 1791-1803. James explores neglected patterns at the macro level. James (1963, p4) connects struggles for and against freedom in France with similar struggles in the colonies: 'The slave-trade and slavery were the economic basis of the French Revolution'. He punctures platitudes. For example, he resituates the abolition movement within the great rivalry between the French and the English as well as the dogged efforts of slave-owning classes to re-establish slavery after each successful challenge. He insists on putting the violent resistance of the Haitian slaves into the context of the much greater violence of their oppressors: 'But when did property ever listen to reason except when cowed by violence?' he asks bitterly (p70). 'The rich are only defeated when running for their lives' (p78).

Shaped by the anti-colonial movements and working class mobilisations of the 1930s, James's story features a few named leaders and the nameless masses, the 'revolutionary tide' (James 1963, p124). The book flourishes at the macro level of the narrative, where vast impersonal forces collude and collide, and at the micro level, where key individuals struggle; in fact, the two are mirrors for one another (p91). The middle is largely missing.[3] James' micro level story of revolutionary heroes, born to lead, is the rhetorical inversion of the grand macro level story of inexorable social forces. James (pix) declares at the beginning that 'the individual leadership responsible for this unique achievement [the Haitian revolution] was almost entirely the work of a single man – Toussaint L'Ouverture'. He continues, 'The history of the San Domingo revolution will therefore largely be a record of his achievements, and his political personality' (px). His Trotsky-inspired stage theory of history foregrounds 'the economic forces of the age; their moulding of society and politics of men in the mass and individual men' (ibid.). Some other individuals are recognised as 'men born to command' but none are presented with comparably vivid detail; meanwhile, their fellow revolutionaries (most of the men and all the women) are reduced to the 'brave but ignorant masses' (pp94, 104).

Through vivid and detailed character sketches James follows the development of revolutionary leadership in Haiti. Rediker points out that James is likely calling on his classical British colonial education to imagine Touissant as a novelist would, a compelling hero who, in James' words, made 'one dreadful mistake': he lost his connection to the black laborers (pp240, 287). Ironically, so did James: his narrative loses its connection to the mid-level of analysis, the connective tissues of political movements, linking some individuals, separating others. James' heroes and villains are 'personification[s] of social forces' which allows James to show social power operating through the actions of individuals (Rediker, 24 January 2019). But if that is all they are, then they become flattened and horizontal relations among them become uninteresting.

The scalability of the largest and the smallest levels of historical narrative in James' narrative, their tight fit with one another, may account for the relative weakness of the meso level of thinking. Other than Touissant, James recounts actors more than he presents them; they seldom speak for themselves. When he introduces opportunities to find the meso-level network of relationships and events, he seldom pursues them. For example, James sketches the colonial race/class structure: a royalist bureaucracy governing or attempting to govern big whites (plantation owners), small whites (traders, artisans), mulattoes, free blacks, and black labourers. Yet his class/race categories typically morph 'up' to the Grand Sweep of History rather than 'down' to assemblages of people and things. 'It was the quarrel between the bourgeoisie and monarchy that brought the Paris masses on the political stage', James (p73) proclaims. 'It was the quarrel between whites and Mulattoes that woke the sleeping slaves' (ibid.). In James' discussion of the bloody slave revolt of 1791, one gets a glimpse of the networks that must have connected the rebels. James (p86) comments, 'Voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy. In spite of all prohibitions, the slaves travelled miles to sing and dance and practice the rites and talk; and now, since the [French] revolution, to hear the political news and make their plans'. Pursuing the meso level of analysis would prompt curiosity about the travel, the singing and dancing, the rites and talk, the listening and the making of plans. To be a 'medium of conspiracy', I would imagine that voodoo needed to be more than a vehicle for 'brave but ignorant masses' (p104).[4] By James' (p244) own admission, there were lots of Toussaints: 'Black men who had been slaves were deputies in the French Parliament; black men who had been slaves negotiated with the French and foreign governments. Black men who had been slaves filled the highest positions in the colony'. I speculate that the same was likely true of former slaves in the lower and middle positions as well; they must have known each other. There must have been intertwining of their families, skills, leisure, reading habits, their places of education, labour, domicile, and worship. Some of them must have been women. Perhaps it is a consequence of James' stadialism that leaders who embody History's forces are given voice while patronising judgements about 'backward' and 'savage' black labourers inadvertently reproduce colonialism's logic.

In contrast to *The Black Jacobins*, *The Making of the English Working Class* thrives at the meso level. Like the radicals he studies, Thompson (1963, p22) 'trust[s] to self-activating and self-organising processes among the common people'. Thompson (p194) tirelessly explores workers' collective self-creations:

> By 1832 there were strongly-based and self-conscious working-class institutions – trade unions, friendly societies, educational and religious movements,

> political organisations, periodicals – working-class intellectual traditions, working-class community patterns, and a working-class structure of feeling.

Workers were not raw material for capitalism; they inherited the rights of free Englishmen, of the commons, the village, and the craft traditions. Meetings of corresponding societies, reading groups, etc., made their appearance as the 'junction point[s]' and 'hinges upon which history turns' (p21). Thompson (p20) affectionately recounts the features of the London Corresponding Society, drawing from 'coffee-houses, taverns, and Dissenting Churches ... where the self-educated journeyman might rub shoulders with the printer, the shopkeeper, the engraver or the young attorney' as well as the older and more homogenous working class communities of dock workers and silk-weavers. The London Corresponding Society 'knit diverse agitations into a common movement' where working people pooled their modest resources and painstakingly organised themselves into spaces that became centres for political action, intellectual creativity, and social gatherings (p21).

Linebaugh and Rediker's *The Many-Headed Hydra* also flourishes at the meso level: the political economy and way of life on sailing ships was the vortex of a network of waterfronts and seaports, combining 'the experiences of the deep-sea ship (hydrarchy), the military regiment, the plantation, the waterfront gang, the religious conventicle, and the ethnic tribe or clan' (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, p179). The tradition of maritime radicalism traced by Linebaugh and Rediker through two and a half centuries of Atlantic history emerges out of concrete settings, technologies, and relationships that work as relay points, resonating with one another, grounding, amplifying and legitimating struggles for change. The radical past becomes coherent when the affective materiality of people's life space is detectable. The reader should be able to smell the sea air and taste the beer. That's why the middle level (the meso level) enlivens and sometimes undermines wide-angle historical accounts: between outstanding individuals and big social forces there must be a living sensorium in which revolutionary arrangements can emerge and even thrive. Interactions within this mid-level do not merely house the micro or reflect the macro; they constitute the conditions of possibility for who people can be and how history can move. While all three intertwined levels are needed, it may be the middle range that is the crucial space for bringing a political movement to life.

At the same time, a coherent picture of the larger structural and processual context is needed to contextualise the micro and meso levels of analysis. The answer to the question 'below what?' that is implicitly raised by writing history from below is, in a word, *power*. Some threshold of power must be identified in order to work out the relations of individuals and groups to that power. Macro level structures and processes

are key to establishing that threshold and imagining its transformation. Thompson's daunting text jumps into one complicated story after another, piling them on with little attention to readers' need for a larger picture into which the compelling pieces can fit. He calls forth dozens of intriguing characters and events, presented in marvellous detail, but with attenuated introduction. The non-specialist reader longs to be reminded of a larger context for what is going on. Macro-level signposts could include adequate timelines, regular condensations of background information, summaries of large-scale historical relationships, accounts of patterns that emerge over time, and sketches of available discursive repertoires into which activists could dip for telling individual and group stories. Context, of course, does not mean passive background; as Tsing has insisted, the landscape is part of the action, not the static stage.

Is there a workable middle ground between Eichner's small sample of women in the Paris Commune and Thompson's ocean of actors in the English working class? Eichner's focus enables an engaging degree of detail, while her narrative arc integrating the lives of the women into the life of the Commune provides an elegant vehicle for moving through the story at multiple levels. The complexity of the meso-level accounts of Demitrieff's labour and defence association, Léo's newspaper and school reforms, and Mink's political clubs makes a rich middle strata linking individuals to the Commune. A chronological frame such as Eichner's account of the Commune or Rediker's tale of the slave rebellion on the *Amistad* lends itself to a detectable beginning, middle and end, which makes for a more compelling story. Anarchist scholarship benefits from telling conceptually-inflected stories that matter, inviting readers to be curious, contributing to creative and critical thinking about struggles to create better worlds.

In sum, I have staged an encounter between anarchist histories and 'history from below' to further develop tools of analysis that the latter can offer to the former. The important question is neither 'were the writers anarchists?' nor 'were they writing about anarchism?' but rather how we can learn from their nurturing of voice and agency in historical subjects, the radical care they bring to their sources, and their demonstration of responsibility to those who, in Hartman's (2019, pxv) poignant words, have been 'credited with nothing'? How can we tell anarchist stories, not just of great individuals or sweeping histories, but of lively movements and the filaments that create them and hold them together? The explicit and implicit writing practices of 'history from below' are central for further developing rich and spirited anarchist histories.

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Revolution: one on letterpress printers in anarchist print culture, another on the role of women in the anarchist movement.

NOTES

1 Zimmer is quoting Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), pxi. Kelley in turn is quoting Victorio de Grazia, 'For a Social History of Politics', *Radical History Review* vol 1980 issue 23 (Spring 1980): 3-7.

2 Rediker confirmed that the Mende language was not written until later. Vai, the language of the slave-trading King Siaka, did have an earlier written syllabary from the same region, so it is possible that some of the Amistad Africans knew written Vai. But there is no evidence showing they did, and in any event their own language was not yet written, so letter-writing would probably not have been a familiar genre (personal conversation, 13 April 2019).

3 Some neuroscientists call for stronger focus on the meso level. Walter Freeman (pp31-32) notes the meso level is important to the study of brains and refers to neurons as 'mesoscopic bridges' in the brain. He states that it is hard to describe exchanges between the levels because 'measures of time and distance are incommensurate and causal inference is far more ambiguous between than within levels'. Liljenström and Svedin (p5) concur on the importance of 'the level in between the micro and the macro, as that is the domain where bottom-up meets top-down'. They call the connectors 'ladders' (p6), which strikes me as, like 'bridges', an unfortunately static image; I'd go more for currents or flows.

4 Several of James' critics praise him for speaking on behalf of the common folk; for instance, Cudjoe and Cain ('Introduction', p5) note his 'boundless affection and esteem for the artistry and imagination of ordinary people'. Robin Blackburn ('The Black Jacobins and New World Slavery', p82) argues, 'He never forgot the presence of the anonymous black rebels and partisans who in the end play a more decisive part than the famous generals and politicians'. See also essays by Helen Pyne-Timothy and H. Adlai Murdoch in this volume. These critics are likely correct in assessing James' overall allegiances during his lifetime of political and intellectual work; my argument here sidesteps this larger question to focus tightly on the rhetorical practices of *The Black Jacobins,* with an eye toward learning how best to write history from below.

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