ANARCHISM AND THE QUESTION OF PLACE:
THOUGHTS FROM THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE

Arif Dirlik
Chinese University of Hong Kong

I take up in this discussion some questions thrown up by anarchism as it is transplanted in political, social and cultural/intellectual environments different from the one that gave rise to it in the first place.¹ I will base my discussion for the most part on anarchism in China in the early part of the 20th century, although I will suggest also that what the Chinese experience has to tell us may be of far broader significance. The issue is ultimately the relationship between anarchism and place.

This issue has not received much attention from anarchists, possibly due to the universalistic assumptions of anarchist theory concerning human nature and community, which supposedly are driven by the same forces regardless of place or time. While historically speaking anarchism is clearly a product of European modernity, anarchists have been quick to discover anarchism in all kinds of places, from small-scale tribal societies in Africa to ancient Chinese philosophies. This has served to reinforce anarchist universalism but also rendered anarchism ideologically ahistorical.

Anarchist universalism not only flies in the face of historical evidence, but is no longer tenable at a time when the legacies of universalism are under suspicion due to their entanglement in Eurocentrism. Anarchism is arguably the most consistently (even naively) universalistic of all the intellectual products of Enlightenment thinking in Europe, and needs to confront contemporary challenges to Eurocentrism.

On the other hand, any such confrontation requires also that we recognize problems with the term “Eurocentrism” itself, which is used uncritically as a cliché in much contemporary writing in Cultural Studies. The products of Enlightenment thinking themselves have histories, modified in time and place. Anarchists, like other 19th century

¹ I am grateful to Roxann Prazniak for reading, and commenting on, this article.
radicals, participated in the circulation of people and ideas across the length and breadth of Europe. Nevertheless, two of the greatest thinkers of anarchism, Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, were themselves products also of Enlightenment thinking as it was filtered through the concerns and experiences of imperial Russia in the middle of the 19th century, and brought their own experiences into their formulations of anarchism.

The anarchism that Chinese intellectuals of the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) encountered in the early part of the 20th century was already a product of global circulation, having spilled out of Europe into locations across Asia, Africa and Latin America—most importantly in their case, Japan. This no doubt enhanced the impression of universalism, as it did with other ideas from various forms of socialism to liberalism and conservatism. Nevertheless, we need to be more closely cognizant of the articulations of anarchism to place (including, ironically, nationalism) in grasping its historical mutations.

My goal here is not to subject anarchism to localized explanations, especially localized explanations of a culturalist sort that give priority to the burdens of the past over the demands of the present. Such explanations, in their efforts to localize anarchism (or any other current of thought), ironically negate the historicity of the intellectual encounter in their very historicism. For the same reason, they also end up erasing the revolutionary impact of the new idea. My concern rather is to look more closely into efforts to domesticate the new idea without erasing its novelty, which required its articulation to local concerns and intellectual legacies. If native experiences shaped the translation of anarchism into local idiom, the very act of translation transformed the local idiom as well. The result was a contemporary structural context that contained the past as a crucial moment but also endowed it with radical new meanings. It is this dialectic that demands closer attention not just for purposes of historical explanation but for the social and political implications of anarchism not just then but presently as well.

_Anarchism in Eastern Asia: an overview_

Anarchism in China is best grasped through a regional perspective that makes it possible to glimpse the many translocal ties within which anarchism flourished for a period of three decades. A recently pub-