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ZACF CONFIDENTIAL INTERNAL DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

THE POLITICO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN ANARCHIST MOVEMENT

- Michael Schmidt, ZACF IS, July 2008

The SA anarchist movement revived specifically in 1992 with the rise of ARM and the DAF, key members of which built the WSF in 1995, which laid the groundwork for today's ZACF refounded in 2007. In that period, the movement went from being represented by white/Indian organisations in the dying days of apartheid, to a black-majority/white-minority organisation shortly after "liberation", to an all-white organisation during the consolidation of "democracy" – an unusual trajectory for a specifically anti-racist organisation, to say the least. This will attempt to briefly tackle what forces were in evidence that so shaped the movement. An important note before I begin: I use racial definitions throughout this piece in their cultural sense, whether perceived and/or imposed, not in their biological sense.

The ARM and DAF's racial composition was determined by its cultural and class composition – middle-class punks – and their politics represented the concerns of that milieu and era (anti-militarism, anti-fascism, anarcha-feminism, ecology). Their more organisationally and theoretically advanced elements, all whites, built a new, syndicalist oriented organisation, the WSF, on the platform of a series of Position Papers (including on race, but with nothing written on culture), influenced by the positions of the Irish WSM, which laid the foundations of a more coherent movement. Its concerns reflected those of the changed milieu and era (syndicalism, African labour, labour education, international relations). But while the WSF's positions, journals and activities enabled it to reach out to certain layers of the black proletariat, notably shop-stewards, it was unable to act as a genuine syndicalist organisation because of its small size – a common enough problem for anarcho-syndicalist organisations which intend building mass organisations of the class while at the same time requiring members to be ideologically homogenous. More seriously, the theoretical development of its black cadre lagged behind that of its white cadre.

The WSF was specifically wound up in 1999 in recognition of these weaknesses (plus the contracting political conditions of the time) and its key replacement, the BMC, remained an all-white affair (although the parallel and associated ZB propaganda project remained

majority-black/white minority). The BMC ran a tight ship, even having a secret J19 core that vetted new membership, and this emphasis on platformist-inspired discipline bore fruit with its successful rescue and operation of the WLM, a vital working-class space, and of its co-establishment of the APF in 2000, both of which ensured the reputation of its militants as serious activists on the SA left. The BMC extended its theoretical development and started the unique *Counter-power* theory/history project, securing the SA movement's place as a vital contributor on the world stage (along with its involvement in projects like the ILS and anarkismo) to the revival of the global anarchist-communist movement, including the ZACF. The ZACF was an attempt – unstated, but real nonetheless – to combine the platformism of the BMC with the synthesisism of the WSF. It based itself explicitly on the southern model of the Brazilian FAG (rather than the WSF's northern model) which had a “specific” core, with outlying Resistencia Popular nodes of social insertion. In echo, the ZACF had its Action Groups based in the townships, membership of which was (and this was unstated) open to less ideologically convinced black cadre. My attempt during the drafting of the ZACF Constitution to have this divide explicitly recognised as (white) rearward collectives and (black) frontline collectives was defeated as it was felt this would unduly emphasise the race/class divide in the Federation. And yet this divide remained very real and was the subject of a series of Strategy Conferences in 2005 which agreed against the ZACF taking a liberal charity approach, preferring hard political agreement.

However, despite numerous advances and much activity in the townships, particularly centred on the troubled Phambili Motsoaledi Community Project, the ZACF's attempt to paper over the cracks between members' vastly disparate levels of understanding (a divide reinforced by race/class) led to the restructuring of the ZACF in 2005 from a federation of six collectives into a three-collective organisation focused on our core competencies of propaganda, defence and social insertion – forced on it by the ill-discipline, inactivity or a lack of theoretical understanding of the Zabalaza Action Group in Umlazi and the Shesha Action Group in Dlamini. But the decline in activity of its black militants and the severing of ties with Motsoaledi forced the dissolution of the ZACF in 2007 and its immediate refounding as a unitary organisation, the ZAC Front (in other words, a single collective, although the three core roles remained). This was done after careful consideration of advice given by the WSM (Ireland), FdCA (Italy) and OLC (Chile). But in doing so, the organisation lost its last black members in Swaziland, reducing it from a biracial “international” organisation to a white “national” organisation. So in 2008, the Front finds itself in the strange position of: a) having a few veteran members who date back to the 1992 origins of the movement, and thus a direct line-of-descent from those origins, with knowledge of all the theoretical developments and debates of those years, b) having consolidated as a result a set of theoretical positions, and pragmatic tactics and strategies, which are continually challenged, updated and tightened, c) achieving the status of being a sought-after provider of knowledge to the militant layer of the black proletariat, and yet d) having lost all of its black members, despite having worked among the black proletariat for, in sum, 16 years. What does this mean for the organisation and for the SA movement of which it is the vanguard? A couple of points become relevant:

1. The platformist / anarchist-communist method of disciplined specific organising is superior to all other anarchist models;
2. As such it does not shy away from its vanguard (in the sense of frontline – not substitutionist) role as what a member of the Nabat called the “leading echelon” of the popular classes;

3. But of necessity this model restricts membership to only the best militants along the lines of “better fewer, but better” and it is precisely this militant minority position that *especifismo* espouses;
4. In 16 years of militancy, those best have almost without exception been proven to be whites while the best black militants have, while good comrades, not been up to the exacting standards of platformism;
5. If theoretical understanding, and therefore the ability to be a conscious militant, is the result of general educational levels, it should be that class and not culture is the determining factor, yet middle-class black members have been ineffective and working-class whites effective;
6. Nevertheless, differences are also discernible among the black popular classes: the black proletariat among our members have been effective while those of the black lumpenproletariat are often deeply problematic;
7. Thus in SA where race is often more important than class as a determining factor in consciousness, we find that white anarchist militants are the de-facto leading echelon, while most black anarchist militants merely follow, certainly at the level of theoretical understanding, which is a core component of the platformist model in terms of reaching decisions democratically;
8. Despite the popularity of ZACF ideas among the black proletariat, it is only a matter of time before serious questions are raised about why an organisation of (mostly) middle-class whites are preaching to the black working class as this indeed hints of substitutionism, with a possible racial flavour;
9. There is no way to artificially solve this dilemma: either we attract black militants of quality or we do not, but we cannot adopt the tried-and-failed synthesist approach which results in the false comfort of a large paper membership as was the case with the WSF (although there is perhaps space for a synthesist network of affiliates working alongside the Front);
10. Other Left-wing organisations have been able to attract black militants, however, raising the question of whether platformism is too advanced for the black working class and poor (and whether other groups’ standards are lower than ours – which is definitely the case with the SACP), or whether the black proletariat is more *politico-culturally* inclined towards Marxist-Leninist or African socialist authoritarianism.

So, are SA black anarchists unequal to the task? After 16 years of activism, I’m forced to say no – as long as the task is established for them under the influence of SA white anarchists. This is obviously an exceptionally uncomfortable thing to say, but it has been proven true too often to ignore. It does need to be qualified by context, however. In other words, the regional anarchist movement has been far too small to be even marginally representative of society. So it would not be possible *at all* to say that “SA blacks are incapable”. But it might be possible to say that the SA Left’s liberatory project, already tainted by cross-class collaboration and by nationalism, was thoroughly disembowelled by the unilateral demobilisation of the UDF and the ascension to state power of the ANC-SACP-Cosatu – as well as tractable elements of the PAC and Azapo, enabling their “developmentalist” hegemonic project. And it is possible to say that within the remnants of that Left, most of it black, that so little experienced leadership was left that the new social movements that emerged circa-2000 were and are very politically uneven and thus unreliable. In fact, despite their proven strength on the ground (able to mobilise more people at demonstrations than the

Alliance) they failed to prevent the xenophobic rampage of May 2008. And it perhaps even possible to say that many elements within the popular classes are so lacking in political skills that they amount to de facto reactionaries, and that some are even believed to have become co-perpetrators in the murderous outrages against fellow black Africans.

And it is possible to say that within these social movements, the progressive, politically conscious layer is very small and hard-pressed. And to say that within that layer, a tiny minority of anarchists has found itself reduced by a variety of internal and external circumstances to a small group of white activists – *all* of the blacks (and *some* whites) within this tiny faction having proven incapable of keeping pace with the physical and intellectual rigours of the anarchist communist organisation. And it is possible to say that all of these black anarchists have fallen either into inactivity or into simplistic *klipgooiery* which lurches from one crisis to the next without any overarching strategy – while the few white apostates have fallen into either inactivity or into *déclassé* intellectual masturbation.

So what is our weakness? Where do we fail? I believe the root of our failure may lie in the exceptionally pervasive and persuasive (but ignored, by the Left) forces of culture, which in SA is a factor intimately related to class and race. It is crystal clear (and here I speak in my own name alone) that:

- 1) The SA Left is vastly eclipsed in the social realm by religion (and is itself deeply infected by the god pestilence), by sport and entertainment and all other manner of spectacular distractions – and that attempts to (re)build a popular-class counter-culture through something other than toyi-toyi have been significantly absent or at least muted (in the case of the SACP/YCL, the sale of branded communist gear smacks more of the market than of true counter-culture);
- 2) That white working class anarchist appreciation of the daily lives of their black working class and poor comrades mostly amounts to approximation, assumption, and even caricature – and that in return, working and poor black militants have little or no understanding of the world within which the white activists operate. There is, in sum, a deep chasm between daily experiences and troubles: bond repayments on the one hand, and the price of maize-meal on the other;
- 3) That the damage done to the mentality of the black population in general by decades of “Bantu national education” has meant the unnurtured ability of most black activists to engage in logical process, self-discipline and autonomous strategic thinking has been strangled at birth. The origins of this flaw, lying as they do in the apartheid system, cannot, however, disguise the fact that it has rendered most blacks incapable of other than the basest service to the Revolution – and because a libertarian socialist Revolution requires full-fledged individuals in possession of these faculties, any activism naturally reverts to authoritarian, leader-led, anti-autonomous modes of behaviour. Thus, a libertarian socialist Revolution is impossible in SA under current and foreseeable internal *politico-social* conditions, all other external conditions aside;
- 4) That on the tiny libertarian socialist revolutionary front, the anarchist-communist movement is reduced to an exclusively white core, while our nearest associates, the autonomists, are overwhelmingly white and Indian, and while further away, the anti-party class-war communists are white and Indian with a smattering of blacks.
- 5) That if we see ourselves as the vanguard of the libertarian socialist Revolution regionally (and despite the far-off nature of the Revolution-as-watershed-event, we

have in truth for the past 16 years played that role in the current Revolution-as-process), it is patently a *white* leading echelon. The dramatic increase in coherence, activity and efficiency of the Front as a result of the December 2007 shedding of our black comrades who made such erratic, lumpen or selfish demands on our time indicates that in local conditions of anarchist organisation, middle-class white activists are peerless. Whether we later attract solid anarchists of other ethnicities, does little to detract from the longevity of this skilled white core (I imagine that in the future when someone researches the SA anarchist movement of our era, they will be struck by the number of Germanic surnames prevailing).

6) We have seen black anarchists, at times, being immensely courageous and hard-working, facing up to both violent and political opposition to libertarian ideas in their communities. They have shown themselves to be ideal for membership in anarchist synthesist political organisations that place the creation of a broad common ethic and a diversity of tactics and strategies above a more narrowly-defined

So, what then? Since 2003, we have based our tactics in terms of our social insertion and *especificismo* on the Brazilian FAG – but the FAG works today within a largely undifferentiated culture. We can put it this way: the FAG is culturally (though not racially) specific, hence their adherence to the cross-border notion of Gaucha culture which, while embracing majority white/latino and minority black members, is homogenous. And if we are to look at the history of the Brazilian anarchist movement, we see several movements cross-pollinating, yes, but running in parallel: Italians, Germans, Spaniards. For decades, the impact of their anarchist activism in Brazil was distinct (not exclusive, but distinct) according to language and culture. And in many instances these poor white immigrants were paid less and constituted a lower class than the slave-originated black Brazilian population – a neat inversion of both white supremacist ideas and *negritude*-influenced ideas that paint all whites as blue-eyed devils. In other words, the class-race dynamic was somewhat inverted in Brazil (which is useful in universalising while deracialising my argument). This politico-cultural *especificismo* was both the strength and the weakness of the historical Brazilian movement: a common libertarian *cultural* identity held the *class* together for decades, but eventually its divisions enabled the state to employ divide-and-rule in order to supplant this cultural identity with a Brazilian *national* identity in the 1930s driven by the New State's hegemonic, corporatist, cross-class project. A similar case can be made by referring to the Yiddish-speaking Jewish anarchist Diaspora, which because of its defined politico-cultural identity had astounding longevity: for example, the Yiddish-language *Freie Arbayter Schtime* in Chicago was published for 87 years, only ceasing when the linguistic group that it served had either died out or become assimilated into the American *national* culture.

Even the SA movement in its origins was initially distinctly white: it took almost two decades from the first initiatives via the IWW to the establishment of the Industrial Workers of Africa. Curiously, the IWA, although established by anarchists of all races was a black syndicalist organisation, while the Indian Workers Industrial Union was also a politico-cultural organisation. So, SA has come out of an intensely fractured history in which cultural cross-pollination is only overtly visible at the edges: the tiny number of cross-racial marriages, and the middle-to-upper-class location of such unions is a distinct example. We thus have *several* SA cultures running in parallel, the obvious distinction being between white and black, although one could break these down into a plethora of identities (remember, I use these terms in their common-usage manner) which approximates those of class – *and* we also have a statist hegemonic, corporatist, cross-class project aimed at welding these cultures together

into a single *national* identity. So we are arguably in roughly the same position as the anarchists of Brazil in the 1910s-1930s period (albeit with the racialised classes inverted): *cultural* identity is a more fertile field of anarchist activity than *national* identity, even class-based national identity. Is it possible that the reason that we have a *white* politico-cultural anarchist movement that has extensively interacted with, but never actually merged with, the black politico-cultural anarchist movement is that such a merger is not possible at this stage of history.

I'm not saying that to attempt to merge these two streams now (which would amount to a synthesist debasement of our ideas) would advance the nationalist cause of the hegemonic state. But perhaps we should not be too quick to seek partially-qualified black members, or be ashamed of our whiteness – for we after all reject both the Maoist theory of “white skin privilege”, and the radical counter-theory of “race-traitorship”. Instead we should proudly recognise that we are (currently, and presumably temporarily) a white anarchist movement. I very much doubt that the Greek, Bulgarian, Jewish, Italian, etc anarchist movements ever denied their essential politico-cultural nature – even while actively pursuing anti-racist, internationalist policies and activities. We also, it must be remembered, have solid international relations with ethno-political anarchist movements, in particular Anarchist People of Color (APOC) in the USA (there are attempts to revive it), CIPO-RFM in Oaxaca, Mexico, and Tinku Juvenil in Bolivia. It is also worth remembering that the Workers and Students Solidarity Movement in Zambia that we helped midwife in 1998 was an all-black affair – and I don't believe we had a moment's pause regarding its ethnic composition when we recommended that it become the Zambian section of the WSF. The same holds true for the current Swazi movement, which suggests that we must of necessity reject the illogical notion that black-only organisations are acceptable and white-only organisations are not.

I'm obviously not in any way suggesting excluding “non-whites” from the ZACF – we will gain such members in the fullness of time – but it is clear that our political development is coloured by our culture and that despite our many advances, our black members have never properly integrated with us over the past 16 years. Even within the majority-white anarchist movements of Europe, cultural-linguistic anarchist groupings are taken to be natural: the Francophone Anarchist Federation crosses the borders of France and Belgium, and yet is specific to French speakers (while anarchists in Brittany have organised themselves into a Breton-speaking grouping). Note that I do not say they are *racially*-exclusive, or *racially* distinct, but that they are bound by common *cultural* characteristics. It is worth me injecting a personal note at this point by way of explanation: while my ex-wife and I were in the biological-racial / racist sense presumed to be a “mixed” couple, me being white and she Indian, we were exceptionally *culturally* close in terms of our socio-political ethics, cultural practices, norms and, dare I say it, lifestyles. And at the same time, despite having worked for 19 years in a progressive racially-“mixed” profession, and despite having been a political activist for 16 years, I can honestly say I do not have a single close black friend. It is overly simplistic to say that this is merely a factor of historical and current racialised class divisions; only accepting the reality of *cultural* differences as part of the race/class dynamic makes sense of this.

I do not wish to presume, however, that all whites have identical cultural norms, even within our tiny movement: for example, Lucien considers himself a “European settler,” despite his Afrikaner heritage, whereas I consider myself an “Afrikaner” or “white African” despite my Anglophone heritage. Nevertheless, while nowhere near identical, even in certain minor

aspects of our politics, Lucien and I share an overarching set of cultural mores that are very distinct, being related party to whiteness and class, but also to what that means (we were both politicised as punk-ish youngsters reading radical comic books, which originated within a defined culture, for example).

Also, I do not wish to presume that white culture is necessarily more progressive than black, although the impact of modernity (rationalism, anti-clericalism / mysticism, science and empirical methodology, tolerance of diversity, cosmopolitanism / eclecticism, etc) has definitely achieved a broader penetration of SA white culture than black. Nevertheless, I have consistently argued for years that almost all South Africans come from authoritarian *cultures* – irrespective of whether they are Zulu, Greek, Muslim, Xhosa, Jewish, Afrikaner, Indian, or whatever – and that our challenge as anarchist-communists is to change the political attitudes of people to buck the trend by embracing libertarian *cultural* practices in everything from methods of debate, analysis and organisation to means of education, child-rearing and play.

We also, in order not to feel disheartened by our inability to recruit a black cadre, need to consider the conditions within which anarchism and syndicalism arose in Africa specifically (and in the world generally). It did not arise within the black peasantry, the black poor, or even the black working class, but among the white working class (often immigrant and not even local), which in turn required developing economies in which there were large settlements of radicalised white workers, drawn there by the specific conditions of the consolidation of capital and industry. These conditions obtained in the Cape Colony after the discovery of diamonds in 1876 and later in the Transvaal with the discovery of gold (and elsewhere in Algeria and Egypt for other, yet similar reasons). It took almost 40 years in conditions of great upheaval – the foundation of Johannesburg in 1886, the South African Wars, the Bambata Rebellion, the shotgun Union of 1910, general strikes, World War One – to go from the propaganda activities of Henry Glasse in the early 1880s through the establishment of the first anarchist organisations (his Socialist Club, and Jose Estevam's Revolutionary League in Mozambique) to the establishment of the first black trade unions, the Indian Workers Industrial Union and the Industrial Workers of Africa. These formations were directly inspired by the *radical culture and tactics* of the IWW – in areas of industrial concentration: the Witwatersrand and the docks. That culture was distinctly *anti-racist*, but was borne through the ports to the goldfields and diamond diggings by *white* immigrants. And it was a noble, long-term effort which initially gained no black adherents, but which by 1917-1919 made a spectacular breakthrough.

CONCLUSION: The Left has ignored culture too long, which is why the Right almost totally dominates the powerful cultural domain, from sports and stokvels to religion and music. Comrade Fatso and others in Zimbabwe have been demonstrating a nearly unchallengeable *politico-cultural* form of resistance that we would do well to examine. Distinct, yet not exclusive, working continually within the townships, inner cities and poor slums, among the popular classes of all races, unfettered by our ineradicable politico-cultural nature, we will attract to our ranks convinced anarchist-communists of colour when the time is right. Nomatter how well intentioned, the WSF and Fed amounted in some respects to shotgun weddings across class and race lines, which inevitably divorced, not because either side failed to try, but because the objective conditions were not right. It is too early to expect the racially-fractured SA working class and poor to *blend* – but they can march *alongside* each other, hopefully in a libertarian socialist direction. And it's our role to help show the way

without pretensions of being what we are not.

ENDS

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"Resist much, obey little" – Walt Whitman