In 2013 the National Bank of Ukraine issued a commemorative coin dedicated to a man named Nestor Makhno. Within Ukrainian political mythology, Makhno has become known as a folk hero for his role in the 1917-1921 revolution, with his Ukrainian peasant armies ceaselessly frustrating Red and White armies alike. However, what this mythology often conveniently overlooks is that Makhno and the 100,000-strong militia that he led were anarchists, fighting to defend and helping to materially establish a region of self-governing “free soviets” beyond both capital and state (Arshinov 2005). How Makhno became re-branded as a nationalist “Robin Hood” figure in Ukrainian consciousness is testament to the power of the capitalist state to re-frame history for nationalistic purposes.

However, even more interesting than the recuperation of anti-nationalist movements, are the ways those movements negotiated, and sometimes even embraced, the potency of the national in their politics. In the context of resurgent populist nationalism across the global North, especially Europe, as well as parts of the global South, this is a pivotal question for anti-nationalists, cosmopolitans, and radicals of all persuasions. Reassessing the Transnational Turn is a timely and welcome exploration of precisely this theme, focusing on the high point of the historical anarchist movement, approximately between the 1870s and 1939. In it, some of the more problematic, politically ambiguous, and under-explored relationships between anarchist movements and (trans)nationalism are interrogated by a range of historians and political scholars.

The book is situated in the context of a so-called “transnational turn” in historical studies of political movements. As arguably the first major transnational political movement,
anarchism rode high on the early wave of globalisation around the turn of the 20th century, in which an intensification of global transport and communication infrastructures brought diverse cultures and nationalities into contact with one another like never before. During that period, global labour movements and communist movements were chiefly characterised by internationalism, reifying the state scale through hierarchical institutional relationships between state-defined bodies. In contrast to this reproduction of what we might call the “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994), the “cross-border networks and diasporic nature of the movement” (p.13) fit well with a transnational methodology and imaginary on the part of the researcher.

The transnational turn thus brought historians of anarchism to the fore, in their efforts to analyse the diverse forms of multiscalar connection, im/mobility and communication that anarchists undertook globally. Methodologically, the editors note that his represents “a process of decentring” (p.6), in which the state scale no longer takes precedence in analytical frameworks. However, aware that “the importance of the state may have been dispensed with too quickly”, they also note that “[c]onsidering anarchist transnationalism in complete isolation from the history of the national state…means discounting a prime determinant” (p.8).

As such, two key questions drive the book; one empirical, and the other methodological. First, what “work” does the nation do in shaping anarchist transnationalism, both as an ideology (anti-nationalism) and as a movemental strategy? How is the nation variously negotiated, resisted or embraced, by whom, in what contexts and to what ends? Second, how can scholars empirically grasp the multidimensional complexity of such movements without resorting to either methodological nationalism, on the one hand, or a disavowal of the national and the state, on the other? What methodological tools are available to scholars to understand how multiple scales of practice and analysis intersect with one another? Both themes transcend the specific topic of anarchist transnationalism and pose
important and uncomfortable questions to a much broader range of scholars and empirical fields. From the outset, then, despite what is at times a slightly “dry” introduction, the themes of the book immediately grab the reader, piquing their interest even from outside the book’s specific sub-discipline.

Following the editors’ introduction, *Reassessing the Transnational Turn* is divided into three sections. The first section considers anarchist theoretical engagements with the state, the nation and nationalism. Davide Turcato begins the section by arguing that an “inclusive” view of nationhood is not incompatible with anarchist politics, provided that it maintains an explicit focus on the incongruence of nation and state and a conception of the nation that foregrounds its co-constitution and “outward” relationships with other forms of identity.

This is followed by a chapter by Ruth Kinna discussing Peter Kropotkin’s theory of the state through a transnational lens. This discussion focuses particularly on Kropotkin’s foregrounding of the state’s contingency and youth within society’s longer-term historical development and its diverse range of non-state forms of organisation that often intersect with national identity. For Kropotkin, “the state represented the degenerative transformation of preexisting political organisation” (p.44), but he sought not to romanticise pre-state polities. Kinna’s chapter is especially relevant to geographers interested in developing new epistemologies and theories of the state, reflecting arguments made elsewhere that a critical re-examination of statism along anarchist lines is overdue (Barrera de la Torre and Ince forthcoming; Springer 2014).

After an interesting discussion of the ambiguous politics of anarchist historian Max Nettlau by Bert Altena, the second section largely departs from theoretical considerations, focusing empirically on how historical anarchists and anarchist movements developed transnational identities, cultures and strategies in the shadow of the nation. This includes fascinating studies by Isabelle Felici and Kenyon Zimmer, investigating anarchist narratives
of migration and anarchist transnational networks in San Francisco, respectively. These, alongside Pietro di Paola’s chapter on the insular transnationalism of the Italian anarchist diaspora, collectively foreground the ways in which anarchist transnational networks functioned through a range of locally- and nationally-embedded practices and relationships, articulating and practising their politics relationally to both their current locations and places of origin. The often forced mobility and immobility of the anarchist movement, with participants experiencing both forced and “voluntary” exile between the late 1800s and 1914, was also a factor which profoundly shaped the ways in which militants connected, organised politically and negotiated their social, spatial and cultural “in-betweenness” (p.92).

Especially illuminating is Raymond Craib’s biographical study of Casimiro Barrios, a young Spanish man who migrated in 1906 to Santiago, Chile, and became a central actor in the local anarchist and radical Left milieu. The use of biography (echoed by Constance Bantman’s comparative biographical sketches in her “prosopographical” chapter later in the book), Craib argues, is especially potent in drawing out the complex intersections of multiple scales including the neighbourhood, the city, nation and state, and the transnational/global. Craib’s compelling argument draws on geographical thought (such as Doreen Massey’s theorisations of place) to conceptualise his subject’s lifecourse as a dynamic site of these intersections. Such an approach, Craib argues, requires attention to the “sedentary” dimension of anarchist transnationalism, a term he deploys “as a means, on the one hand to emphasise ‘place’ and, on the other hand, to escape the politically and epistemologically inadequate categories deployed by (and derivative of) the nation-state” (p.141).

The third and final section is perhaps the most discomforting for the reader. Its chapters critically interrogate the (often highly problematic) role of nationalism within historical anarchist movements and individuals’ philosophies. The first chapter, by Nino Kühnis (who tragically died during the production of the book), begins the section by deploying social movement theories to explore the dynamics of national identity and
divisions among the historical anarchist movement, considering the national as a “negative commodity” through which anarchists produced their counter-narratives of political events—especially in their well-developed transnational newspaper networks.

Conversely, in chapters by Bantman and Martin Baxmeyer the book turns to address some of the more troubling ways in which anarchists have embraced and mobilised the nation and nationalism (and even racism), considering early French anarchists (Bantman) and anarchist writers in the 1936-39 Spanish Civil War (Baxmeyer). Their almost brutally honest chapters bring us back to the image of Nestor Makhno’s anarchist head on a shiny Ukrainian coin, foregrounding the complex interplay of anarchism’s ideological anti-nationalism with broader cultural and geopolitical factors, through which anarchist attempts to apply leverage to situated political landscapes can lead to deeply problematic attitudes and strategies. Indeed, at the end of the book, it is hard to know quite what to make of it all.

This links to one quibble that detracts slightly from what is overall an impressive book. Following the final chapter—Baxmeyer’s fascinating but extremely discomforting critique of the racism and nationalism contained within anarchist literature during the Spanish Civil War—the book abruptly ends without any kind of conclusion or even a brief afterword. After such a rich, lively and thought-provoking series of interventions, the reader is left hanging in mid-air, wondering where to look for some kind of “closure” or pointers for further progress. A short closing section would have been a very positive contribution, especially for readers unfamiliar with the subject matter or disciplinary background.

Nevertheless, the end result is a compelling series of interventions. They speak not only to their direct disciplinary peers but also to broader currents and concerns across the social sciences. Anarchists, and Left academia more generally, tend to occupy a comfortable space in which it is easy to feel like our intellectual development and ideas are somehow immune from the gritty realities of social life and the various dimensions of nationalism, parochialism and localism that run through it. On the contrary, *Reassessing the Transnational*...
Turn asks us to delve deeply and honestly into the canon and mythology of radicals past and reconsider their lived ambiguities and complexities, including the darker sides which we might prefer to ignore.

References


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