

Living Anarchy

The Massif

800million

This zine was originally an art/research poster series titled "Living anarchy", part of slumberkitty's solo exhibition "In this dream we thrive" held at Watch This Space in July 2022.



The southeast asian massif is a large geographical upland area of many interconnected mountainous and plateau regions that have been home to indigenous people, and refugees fleeing empire and state formation in the lower areas, for a very long time. These societies have historically been without outside rule, even where empires and nation-states claim these territories, their rule has been tenuous or non-existent here. The nation-states of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, India and China, claim territory in the massif, which is sometimes known as "Zomia" after the word "zomi", a commonly shared word for "highlander" in many indigenous languages spoken from Tibet to Myanmar. At least 100 million people, and to varying extents a further 700 million people, are living in effective stateless zones with varying levels of indigenous governance, self-determination and autonomy. However, their existence has often been threatened, autonomy tenuous and their locations in flux, overlapping, migrating, often forced to do so.

Residents, along with regional and western researchers, from economists to anthropologists, have conducted analyses of the statelessness of these communities and their histories, to find explanations as to how/why they have existed for so long. Common conclusions include: the difficulty of empire and state functions to reach into rugged and distant terrain, the focus and of development and regimes of control on maritime activities and centres, and the agency of communities, particularly refugees, in intentionally fleeing empire and state rule to begin new lives or join with others in whatever relative autonomy and freedom they might be able to create together.

Many of these communities have their own languages and cultures. They include the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Palaung, lu Mien, Yao, K'nyaw, Khampa, Naxi, Drung, Mosuo, Lopa, Bhutia, and many, many others. All major religions of southeast and east Asia are practiced here, along with indigenous belief systems, with a lot of overlap, fusion and coexistence, making the massif a haven for religious minority communities fleeing persecution. Some suggest that the mountainous regions of northeast India, Pakistan & Afghanistan could also be included in this vast area, while others suggest this is a separate but similar region of stateless societies. However they are defined and studied, they represent the largest communities of stateless people on the planet, problematising the colonial notion that state formation civilises societies through centralised organisation, violent control and military defence.

Municipios Autónomos
Rebeldes
Zapatistas 
360,000+ 1994 - today



"Here, the people give the orders, and the government obeys" - MAREZ motto

The Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities collectively make up an autonomous region in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Within them, over 360,000 people make decisions through local people's assemblies, and co-ordinate shared efforts through Councils of Good Government. Free education, healthcare and housing are available to those who live there, indigenous languages and cultural practices flourish, and huge improvements have been made to the environment and water supply. Feminism (inclusive of trans & gender diverse people) is a foundational element of Zapatista practice. It's economy is largely self-reliant, with agricultural products, clothing and coffee produced through co-operatives, profits from ethical export pathways are used to pay for fuel and medical supplies. The region is protected by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), a mostly rural, indigenous-led decentralised guerrilla force, which prohibits its members to take any position of political decision-making power.

For years, indigenous communities living under the Mexican state in the region of Chiapas planned this movement in secret. Following a few years of widespread indigenous resistance to and protests against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the EZLN released its first declaration on January 1, 1994, explaining that armed struggle was the only option left to the indigenous people of Chiapas. They came out of the jungle and destroyed police and military sites in the towns of the region, and freed prisoners from the jail in San Cristobal. The Mexican state responded with violence, beginning on-and-off armed conflict until early 1995 when an uneasy peace began to settle. In 2001, the Zapatistas won a demobilisation of the Mexican military from the region after marching on Mexico City and building significant grassroots support globally, notably utilising the internet to great effect. "The EZLN ... demands ... were a compendium of long-standing grievances of the indigenous communities of Chiapas, but also found echo in broad sectors of Mexican society outside of Chiapas: work, land, housing, food, healthcare, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice, and peace."

For 28 years now the indigenous communities of the Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities in Chiapas have been building a new society in collaboration with and connection to the wider world. They have held many international gatherings and convergences, and toured Mexico and the world inspiring and cultivating the revolutionary spirit in us all. *"in the world that we hold in our collective heart, there is room for everyone [todas, todos, todas]. That is true for the simple reason that that world will only be possible if all of us struggle to build it."* Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés, October 5, 2020

"the people's consciousness rebels against any pacification"
- Frantz Fanon *Wretched of the Earth*

What we are able to win from our rulers is only ever limited by the extent of our collective participation, mediated for sure by criminalisation, the punitive carceral state, policing, and a mass commercial media industry maintaining false consciousness, fear and division, all of which ultimately serve to discourage us from acting directly, disruptively and collectively. The moment we are participating in the world we want will be the moment we've won it, and we don't need the benevolence of political parties, rulers, crises, or the permission of revolutionary vanguards. When we want it collectively, it will be ours. Our task ultimately is social, relational transformation through the only engine of change, our collective action.

We need to stop blaming people's revolutions for their failures and destruction, none of them self-destructed, all have been destroyed by outside forces hostile to them, often directly or indirectly supported by those who call themselves revolutionaries, socialists or communists, acting through the so-called "worker's" state that was supposed to be an usher of anarchy, not it's murderer. History proves to us that there can never be such a thing. Why do we persist with advocating for the usurpers, betrayers and poisoners of revolutions, instead of the revolutions themselves and the every day people who made them happen? We need them to happen again, over and over. Utopia is a neverending revolution, an evolutionary process fundamental to our shared co-existence.

What dream do you want to live?

Paris

2 million 1871



The people of Paris have risen up and overthrown several regimes of rule over its many hundreds of years, but in 1871, the city of 2 million people (at the time), decided to replace the system of rule with something different, experimenting in communistic and anarchistic forms of decision-making and political organisation. With 500,000 industrial workers, 400,000 other workers, 115,000 servants and 100,000 migrants and political refugees, and revolutionary sentiment among the French National Guard, the city was ripe for a revolutionary moment.

For two months, from March 18 till May 28, a revolutionary people's commune governed Paris. It consisted of a council of delegates that were recallable in theory, representing all the left-wing tendencies in Parisian politics at the time. During these two months the council assumed the previous regime's instruments of power to make church property public property, flew the red flag of the labour movement, abolished child labour, implemented limited pensions, enacted feminist, communist and anarchist policies, including permitting workers to take over businesses abandoned by their owners. Within the expanded freedom, residents of the city established mutual aid networks and organisations supplying free food and tools and materials to anyone who needed them. Karl Marx & Frederick Engels proclaimed the Paris Commune as the first example of a worker's state, though in practice it attempted to dissolve state powers to a fairly large degree, and there was a great amount of autonomy afforded to everyday people of Paris, who went about building an anti-capitalist, anti-state, society.

Alas, it wasn't to last long, in short the French Army was sent to the city and as many as 20,000 people of Paris were killed by the National Guard during the French regime's retaking of the city. 43,000 were arrested and many thousands fled to other cities and states until being pardoned in 1880. 15,000 were tried and 13,500 sentenced, 95 receiving the death penalty. The Paris Commune however, signalled the beginning of an era of great industrial working class activity, movements, strikes, workplace takeovers and revolutions, the threads of which continue to run through all our lives to this day.

شمال سوريا Rojavayê

2 million 2014-today



The Rêveberiya Xweser a Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriyeyê, or Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also known as Rojava, declared its autonomy from the state of Syria in 2014, following the collapse of the Assad regime's rule in the region. Mass protests in 2011 demanding an end to Assad's rule were met with violence from the regime, which escalated into a civil war. The region has a significant Kurdish population that connects with broader Kurdish stateless communities of 20-30m people spread over northern Syria & Iraq, southern Turkey, and western Iran, each region having its own unique politics, strategy, geopolitical circumstance and level of autonomy from state rule.

Within the Rojava region, diverse polyethnic and tri-linguistic communities make decisions through a secular confederalist structure that is semi-directly democratic. Anarchistic, libertarian socialist and feminist ideas are combined into a uniquely 'Kurdish communalism'. School curriculum is taught in the three local languages (though it has been criticised for the inclusion of compulsory learning of Abdullah Ocalan's ideas, rather than a free education model). Higher/tertiary education is now available to people in the region for the first time, with the University of Afrin and University of Rojava being created. Libraries, arts & cultural centres and practices are emphasised and proliferate. Freedom of the press is constitutionally granted with media now broadcast in multiple languages.

Around three quarters of property has been collectivised and one third of industrial production is run by worker's councils. Co-operatives provide the largest proportion of agricultural products. Remaining private property is tolerated under a principal of 'ownership by use'. The justice system is shifting further towards supportive and rehabilitative approaches and away from punitive and carceral approaches, many behaviours have been decriminalised and many people released from prisons, though there are still some local police and internal security forces. An estimated 400 people remain incarcerated in Rojava, mostly former ISIL fighters charged with terrorism-related offences. Legal/formal equality of women, ethnic minorities is recognised within the legal system. At the local level, Peace and Consensus Committees can be formed by communities to make decisions on disputes and minor crimes.

Since 2016, the Turkish government has conducted several military operations to make incursions into Rojava/AANES to discourage neighbouring towns and regions from joining and quell Kurdish activity within Turkish borders. The popular global support for Rojava's left-wing practices has been crucial to the ongoing success of the region's autonomy. The global community of nation states however, continues to refuse to acknowledge its existence. Rojava's ongoing existence is up to everyday people.

광주광역시
Gwangju
856,545 9 days 1980



In 1979, the president of Korea was assassinated by the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, ending 18 years of dictatorial rule. In his absence, military leaders jostled for control of state power, while everyday people activated and broadened social movements. Teachers and students who had been expelled for their political beliefs under the former president, returned to classes and rapidly established student unions and activist groups. In a matter of months large protests were underway in Seoul. In response, a Korean military general imposed martial law upon the whole country, and deployed the military to suppress the protests. In the city of 광주광역시 Gwangju, the centre of a region where people had been particularly exploited and oppressed by military rule, an uprising was imminent.

When soldiers were sent to break up a gathering of students at the Chonnam National University, the students fought back, sparking a rapid escalation of protest. Soon, military began killing protesters, and the broader community joined in, first taxi and bus drivers, later workers from other industries. Police, frustrated at the overarching military authority, refused to open fire on protesters, some joined the protests. By May 21, the people of Gwangju had raided sufficient weapons from barracks and police stations, including two sub machine guns. The people of Gwangju called the emergent militia 아군 (our forces), and together they ran the military out of Gwangju, creating a state-less, military-less city for a further six days.

In the newly liberated Gwangju, Citizens and Students Committees were established, meeting people's needs through mutual aid, and entered negotiations with the military, which was being reinforced by troops from around Korea. Military leaders demanded residents relinquish their weapons, but would give no assurances that there wouldn't be military reprisals, so the people refused. Protests also took place in other regions. In Haenam people also successfully raided armories and created citizen militias. Protests by farmers and rural workers in the region surrounding Gwangju also proliferated.

On May 27, the Korean Army troops with special US authorisation, were deployed to "retake Gwangju". 1,000-2,000 people were killed during the conflict. May 18 was declared an official memorial day in 1997 and is still observed as a day of mourning and those who protested and liberated Gwangju from military rule are remembered and celebrated by the Korean state as a key origin of liberal democracy in Korea. Many in the city still remember the uprising and many openly share stories of this time to anyone interested.

Вільна Територія
Free Territory
7.5 million 1918-21



The people's revolution in the Russian empire in early 1917 saw the overthrow of the Tsarist regime, and a collapse of rule throughout the empire, particularly in its furthest reaches. One such place, centered on the region of Zaporizhzhia, in present day Ukraine, declared itself an independent and autonomous "Free Territory", which came to be known as Махновія (Makhnovia) by outsiders, though those who lived there never called it that. They rejected Ukrainian nationalism and state formation. Political decision-making took place through the horizontally structured Regional Congress of Peasants, Workers & Insurgents, land was redistributed to the people and run through traditional peasant communes, workers controlled and run industry, and decentralised worker militias in the form of "black guards" defended the region from attacks. 7.5 million people lived within anarchist organisational forms and a libertarian socialist economy for nearly three years, in which time free education, healthcare, freedom of press, speech & association, and complete political decision-making participation, were available to people for the first time. It even provided wage subsidies to Ukrainian workers in other regions outside the Free Territory.

This situation was seeded by a long-running anarchist movement in the region, which was ethnically diverse, and produced a huge amount of grain, half of which was exported for use throughout the Russian empire. The farm working peasantry and agricultural processing proletariat collaborated and maintained traditional communes and agricultural co-operatives despite nobility-controlled land and factories. Once the Tsarist regime was overthrown, the peasantry and proletariat of the region stopped paying taxes, and redistributed land from the Russian nobility to the peasantry, through a people's congress. Workers were armed and organised into "black guards" facilitated by Ukrainian anarchist Maria Nikiforova, which voluntarily followed the strategic leadership of Nestor Makhno. This "black army" managed to defend the Free Territory from Austro-hungarian empire, White Army and Red Army attempts to invade the region.

Despite the Free Territory and Bolsheviks shared goal of full communism/anarchy, in spite of the successes of the Red and Black Armies collaborating to defeat the White Army in the region, and the growing popularity and spread of anarchy/communism into Eastern Europe, the Bolsheviks commanded the Red Army to invade and occupy the Free Territory, which it did by early 1920, beginning a period of forced disarmament of peasants and workers, secret police assassinations of suspected revolutionaries, and military rule, in which 200,000 peasants and proletarians of the Free Territory were killed. The black guards successfully defended the territory for a while, but by late 1921 the remnants of the Black Army were forced to flee, leaving the people of the Free Territory subject to Bolshevik rule, which would extend throughout Ukraine for the next 72 years. We can only imagine how far the revolution would have spread and deepened if anarchism flourished instead in the Free Territory.

신민주
Shinmin
2million 1929-31

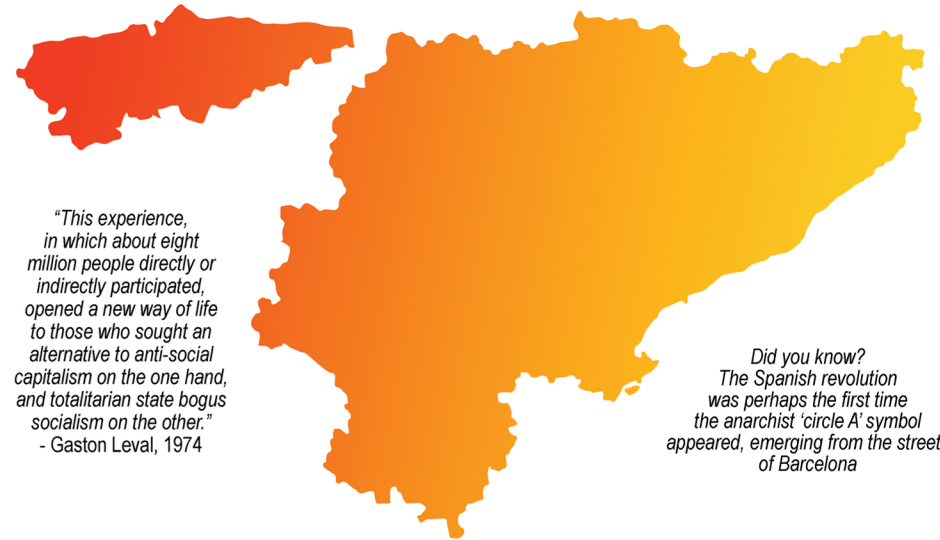


The region of Shinmin in Manchuria is currently occupied by the government of the People's Republic of China, but from August 1929 till October 1931, it was free of rule. Around 2 million people made decisions through local popular assemblies held in villages, and at key points delegates converged and met, no government or hierarchical system of rule existed. The economy consisted of free shops, free stores, gift exchange and worker co-operatives, something akin to libertarian socialism, very close to full communism/anarchy, with gift exchange and mutual aid at its centre. A peasant militia trained in guerrilla tactics, and worked collaboratively with a militarily experienced Korean People's Army, to defend their region from the Empire of Japan and the Soviet Union, both of which sought to invade, control and destroy the people's autonomous Shinmin.

The region was free to implement these measures due to the large number of Korean 무정부주의 mujeongbujui (anarchists) that fled persecution under Japanese military rule of Korea, and formed the Korean Anarchist Federation of Manchuria. This greatly influenced the three tenuous provisional governments that remained in Manchuria after the Chinese warlord's military dictatorship in the region. These three authority/government bodies decided to merge together into the Korean People's Association of Manchuria (KPAM), and committed to reject Korean Nationalism and state formation, and instead opted to dissolve government powers and implement anarchist and libertarian socialist/communist practices.

However, by mid 1930, the region was encircled by the Japanese military to the south and Soviet military in the north. So-called "communists" carried out assassinations, along with covert military operations from Soviet and Japanese Imperial militaries. Japanese forces eventually invaded Manchuria in September 1931 and many Korean anarchists were forced to flee to southern China, where they joined with the strong anarchist movement there, and contributed significantly to the defense of the region during the Second Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45. The anarchist movement in Japan-China-Korea at the time was laying the groundwork for wider region collaboration, what could they have achieved if they continued to spread and liberate other regions?

Aragón, Asturias,
Llión y
Catalunya
8million 1936-39



"This experience, in which about eight million people directly or indirectly participated, opened a new way of life to those who sought an alternative to anti-social capitalism on the one hand, and totalitarian state bogus socialism on the other."
- Gaston Leval, 1974

*Did you know?
The Spanish revolution was perhaps the first time the anarchist 'circle A' symbol appeared, emerging from the streets of Barcelona*

The largest and furthest reaching explicitly anarchist society that ever existed spread through eastern and northern Spain, in the regions of Aragón, Asturias, León and Catalonia (written in their local languages above), in the late 1930's and involved at least 8 million people (some estimates as high as 12 million), who were involved in anarchist societies, libertarian socialist economies, rejecting Spanish nationalism and state formation, in favour of decentralised decision-making and co-ordination structures. Millions of people made decisions by local assemblies, affinity groups, worker's councils, co-operatives and collectives, which sent recallable delegates to co-ordinate inter-regionally and inter-nationally, across many languages. Anarcho-syndicalist unions the CNT & FAI, with millions of members, precipitated the industrial worker control and management of workplaces.

The achievements of the people in these regions through these means are completely astounding for their depth, particularly given they were doing so during a war against the fascist Francoist military, and with hostility from both liberals advocating for a bourgeois state and so-called 'revolutionary' communists advocating for a one-party state. The people, peasants and workers wanted full communism, total anarchy, now. And they rapidly implemented it themselves. Land collectivisation, complete worker control, non-currency exchange, free shops, gift economy, free education, free healthcare (incl. one of the best responses to the tuberculosis epidemic in the world at the time). Almost every industry was collectivised and run by workers, from transport, energy, food production, to hospitals, mills, and the water supply. The massive Mujeres Libras (free women) movement flourished and wove free love, feminist practices, reproductive healthcare, economic participation and workplace control into the fabric of the new society.

Women played a crucial role in the workers militias, of which there were around 18,000 permanent and 150,000 volunteers defending their new society from the spread of Franco's fascist military. And they did this through non-hierarchical militia structures, with old weapons and scarce ammunition. The liberal democracies of Europe refused to provide assistance to them - although many tens of thousands of people from around the world voluntarily flocked to Spain to fight fascism and defend anarchism, including many from Australia. The lack of air support against the newest fighter planes being trialed in Spain by Nazi Germany, and the hoarding of weapons and ammunition by the Soviet Union backed provisional government, starved the worker's militias of vital tools that would otherwise have helped defend the regions or even defeat fascism in Spain. We will never know to what extent the anarchist revolution in Spain may have been able to spread and weather it would have been able to counter the growth of fascism in Europe, and perhaps stave off the second world war. The forces of fascism, liberalism and authoritarian "communism" that conspired against anarchist Spain, denied us these possibilities.