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Albert Meltzer

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or Tolstoy revisited

1991

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Two caricatures of anarchism

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There may be an obvious answer as to why those who think Tolstoy the greatest mind of the century assume they know better than he did himself as to what he believed. In an introduction to a new selection of Tolstoy's essays, David Stephens trashes Black Flag for saying he wasn't an Anarchist (neither was he as supposed a Christian or a Pacifist). Stephens cites Woodcock to prove his case, wow, that's us squashed. A few pages later we read Tolstoy never called himself an Anarchist, but how would he know what he was? (He never read Prof. Woodcock).

Stephens also admits Tolstoy attacked the Church — and was excommunicated — for his opposition to Christianity as generally understood. But how would the Church know? (Read his 'Resurrection' for a bit of superb blasphemy, he wasn't half as bad as admirers of his writings make you think).

There is no mention of his not being a Pacifist in this book as his writings on guerrilla warfare are dismissed as belonging to the time when he was a 'dissolute novelist'. (Consider Shakespeare's philosophy, but you must start from King Lear! When he wrote Hamlet he was still a dissolute playwright).

Stephens thinks our rejection of the Count as an Anarchist is because of an 'antipathy' existing between aspects of anarchist thought — a typical liberal pacifist remark (usually they put it down to personal antipathy, never to fundamental political differences: they have no politics). Our 'uncompromising rejection' of Tolstoyans — rather than Tolstoy — he thinks, finds no echo among Anarchists in other countries and he cites Germany, though there the kingdom-of-love-within-you-resist-not-evil crap gets very short shrift in anarchist circles.

What did Tolstoy really think about Anarchism? In 'On Anarchy' he writes:

The Anarchists are right in everything...they are mistaken only in thinking that Anarchy can be instituted by revolution'. In this edition, inserted before the word revolution is [violent,. Ed]! Ignoring the editorial advice that Tolstoy didn't mean what he said, the message is plain and later made plainer. The transformation to anarchy, used as a synonym for the Kingdom of Heaven, is within you, transform your lives, do as you would be done by, rulers and rulers alike obey the teachings of Jesus and ignore those laid down by Christianity and the State. Live under tyranny but do not join it.

This is Anarchism turned inside-out and made into its opposite. In other hands it is an excuse to attack Anarchism, but nothing else, as 'violent' (echoed by the media and judges, ignoring Tolstoy's comments on government) unless accepting impossible conditions. It plainly differs from anarchism as conceived by working people in terms of struggle. It doesn't work — Tolstoy's own life was a testimony it didn't, as also shown by the neo-Tolstoyans who worship their State hand outs and reject revolution, or the drop-out middle class woolly-hats/woolly-minds regarding themselves as peasants. It is the alternative caricature of Anarchism to the mindless-violent caricature it originated.

The politico most influenced by Tolstoy was Gandhi, neither an Anarchist, a Christian nor precisely a Pacifist (he didn't mind people getting killed for his glory so long as they didn't kill). Tolstoy's problem was the old 'Buddhist' one: when he said stop worshipping Jesus and instead listen to what he had to say, his followers worshipped Tolstoy instead and never listened to him either (not that it was always worthwhile doing so). Another lasting minor Buddha was Mary Baker Eddy. There are Christians who are scientists, but her philosophy of Christian Science is neither scientific nor (as normally understood) Christianity. It is a magic cult. Similarly, it is not to say pacifists (as the term is normally understood) or Christians could not possibly be Anarchists. They could. But the words Christian anarchism or Anarcho-Pacifism are usually synonyms for a type of liberalism, often the worst kind.