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Review: Social Anarchism or Lifestylist Anarchism — An Unbridgeable Chasm

Murray Bookchin. 86 pages. AK Press. price 5.95

Anarchist Communist Federation

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As Bookchin himself says “Stated bluntly: Between the socialist pedigree of anarcho-syndicalism and anarcho communism...and the basically liberal, individualistic pedigree of lifestyle anarchism... there exists a divide that cannot be bridged unless we completely disregard the profoundly different goals, methods, and underlying philosophy that distinguish them.” In this blistering attack on lifestylism, individualism and primitivism, this veteran of the libertarian movement pulls out all the stops. His constant affirmation of the revolutionary, social and collective core of Anarchism throughout this booklet warms the cockles of the heart of any Anarchist Communist worth their salt. Bookchin seems concerned that this revolutionary core is being eroded to the point where the word anarchy will become part of the chic bourgeois vocabulary of the coming century naughty, rebellious, insouciant but deliciously safe. This pessimism is not borne out

by a look at the facts. Bookchin appears to be referring to the Anglo-Saxon Anarchist scene, although he seems to believe this process is also going on in for, example, the Latin countries. Now admittedly the so-called Anarchist movement in the United States and Canada is diabolical. This reviewer remembers well the American and Canadian “Anarchists” who turned up to the Trieste International Anarchist conference who sickened many East and West European comrades there, not to mention those who turned up for the Class War International event. But even so there do exist groups and individuals on the other side of the Atlantic who do profess some kind of class -struggle anarchism. Shouldn’t Bookchin bear this in mind and make reference to them as a counter-weight to the individualists and lifestylists he describes? Similarly, Bookchin seems remarkably ignorant of the Anarchist movement in Ireland and Britain. Is he not aware that the majority of Irish Anarchists hold class struggle views, as does the Scottish Anarchist Federation. Is he not conscious of the fact that the number of class struggle anarchists in England and Wales have increased dramatically in the last 2 decades? Why no reference to any of the organisations and papers that espouse such views? And what about the movement in the rest of Europe? It would be preposterous to regard it as predominantly lifestylist!

Alternative

Nevertheless this pamphlet is a welcome addition to the arguments in favour of what Bookchin defines as social anarchism and against the latter day individualism which he believes started taking hold with the defeat of the 60s counter-culture. He notes: “ No less than Marxism and other socialisms, anarchism can be profoundly influenced by the bourgeois environment it professes to oppose, with the result that the growing “inwardness” and narcissism of the yuppie generation have left their mark upon many avowed radicals. Ad hoc adventurism, personal bravura, an aversion to theory oddly akin to the antirational biases of postmodernism, celebrations of theoretical incoherence (pluralism), a basically apolitical

and anti-organisational commitment to imagination, desire, and ecstasy, and an intensely self-oriented enchantment of everyday life, reflect the toll that social reaction has taken on Euro-American anarchism over the past two decades”.

Now, Bookchin was involved in various attempts at radicalising the counter-culture in the 60s, to his credit. But perhaps his involvement has made him a mite indulgent. Whilst admitting the counter-culture’s “shortcomings” he fails to say what they are. Certainly individualism and self-centred pursuit of pleasure can be discovered to a lesser or greater extent in the sayings of counter-cultural figureheads like Timothy Leary, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin. The impact of decades of reaction since then should not obscure the fact that these tendencies were already there and that little attempt was made to counterpose a class struggle perspective.

Bookchin, in his often brilliant diatribes against the Primitivists, fails to emphasise the other side of the coin. Productivism, production for production’s sake, one of the chief maxims of capitalism, is one of the mechanisms that the Primitivists, no matter how wrong-headedly and in such a mistaken way, are rebelling against. In castigating the anti-technology and anti-civilisation stances of Primitivism, one feels that Bookchin errs too much in the other direction. Certainly he fails to sufficiently address himself to the problem of unbridled Production. Similarly, whilst agreeing with his denunciation of the anti-civilisation poses- and indeed poses are what they often are- of the primitivists, Bookchin fails to emphasise what this reviewer feels is of utmost importance. The primitivists have substituted the Civilisation of the last few thousand years with a call for the destruction of Civilisation. Well, I go along with them on this. Except that I want to substitute a new Civilisation, based on values nurtured in the libertarian movement and starting to develop now with a culture of resistance, not the end of civilisation per se. Bookchin fails to explain that a future society would mean a new Civilisation, transcending, and indeed destroying this one.

Democracy

Bookchin vaunts democracy as “not antithetical to anarchism”. But we in the ACF feel that this ambiguous term, so often used to mobilise the masses to go to war for capitalism and the State and to counter the Western Powers’ struggle with the Soviet bloc, cannot be used without confusion. Some of Bookchin’s “disciples” have used his call for “libertarian municipalism” to run as candidates for City Council elections. Indeed in Canada, some of these “disciples” have run on “libertarian” tickets for Quebec nationalism. Now, Bookchin, has vigorously denounced nationalism and support for “National liberation” in this book, and the views of his “disciples” should not be mistaken for his own. But he really needs to clarify just what he means by his slogan “Democratise the republic, radicalise the democracy”. Is he in favour of “libertarian municipalism” “of the sort where “libertarians” capture the local State (and end up being captured by it)? As he states, he has lost the view that the working class is the revolutionary subject of history, that is, that it is destined to bring about the radical overthrow of capitalism. In doing so, he appears to have dug himself into the hole of libertarian municipalism, out of which it seems difficult for him to get out.

Despite these criticisms, this booklet is well worth reading for arguments against the erroneous ideas of Stirner and Nietzsche. Indeed, Bookchin quite correctly points out that Emma Goldman, despite avowing an anarcho communist ideology, was a Nietzschean “cheek to jowl in spirit with individualists”. His brisk attacks on the likes of L. Susan Brown, Hakim Bey, George Bradford and John Zerzan should be read by all serious Anarchists who are looking for a coherent revolutionary answer to the confusion of these thinkers.