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So why call it Anarchism?

Anarcho

May 18, 2011

The Strange Case of Tory Anarchism, Peter Wilkin, Libri Publishing

What have we done to deserve this? Really, what is it about anarchism which makes non-anarchists think they can appropriate our names and attach it to the ideologies and systems anarchism developed in protest against? Thus we have an oxymoron like “anarcho-capitalism” inflicted upon us, despite anarchism’s well-known *socialist* credentials.

Now Peter Wilkin has produced a book on “Tory Anarchism.” All that really needs to be said of this book is quote Wilkin himself: “It needs to be stressed that Tory anarchists are not anarchists in the traditional sense of the term” (32) So why call them anarchists? After all, George Orwell “aside” (perhaps because he was a socialist?), Tory anarchists “tend not to share the ideals of anarcho-syndicalists, anarcho-communists and so on, to put it mildly” (33) So why call it anarchism?

The term “Tory Anarchism” is associated with Orwell who used it to describe Jonathan Swift in his essay *Politics vs. Literature*. Swift was “a Tory anarchist, despising authority while disbelieving in liberty, and preserving the aristocratic outlook

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while seeing clearly that the existing aristocracy is degenerate and contemptible.” A slim basis to produce a book from as any sensible person would realise Orwell was pointing to the contradictory nature of Swift’s politics rather than suggesting that such a theory could exist.

While Phillip Blond, director of British think tank ResPublica, has suggested the so-called Red Tory thesis no one would write a book called “Tory socialism” or “Tory communism.” So why does anarchism get this treatment? Partly, because there are not many of us and, as a consequence, our protestations can be ignored. Partly, because anarchism is not well known and people prefer to rely on the dictionary definition (purely opposition to government) rather than discover what it actually stands for.

Thus we see people combine a whole series of contradictory notions under “anarchism” because someone proclaims themselves “anarchist” or “against the state.” This fits into the dictionary definition and so what anarchism as a social movement means by the term can be forgotten.

This can be seen from Wilkin’s book when he proclaims that Anarchism’s “central aim is the elimination of the state and government in favour of a society of freely cooperating people” (32) Yes, *people* and so *not* a class society. We have always aimed to abolish classes, to end the situation (to use Proudhon’s words) where “the class that obeys and suffers” (the proletariat) has “parted with their liberty” and “have sold their arms” to “the class that commands and enjoys” (the capitalists and landlords). Yet we discover that “Tory anarchists” celebrate Britain’s class system! Still, they *at times* condemn all classes for their role in Britain’s decline – but not class systems *as such*.

For the traditionalist, in the past people in all classes knew their place and their role and members of all classes are to be condemned for adjusting to a changing reality. For the anarchist, this changing reality points to a classless society and we denounce (to again quote

Proudhon) the “affirming as a definitive state a transitory condition, — namely, the division of society into patricians and proletarians.”

Significantly, Wilkin suggests that Tory anarchists think capitalism is the least bad kind of economy. Except Orwell I assume, since he was (like “traditional” anarchists) a socialist. But, as Wilkin states, Tory Anarchism is not anarchism “in the traditional sense.” For anarchism in the “traditional sense” has always combined a critique of the state with a critique of property/capitalism. Surely the title of the first book by the first self-proclaimed anarchist should show that anarchism has never been purely concerned with the state? Answering “Property is Theft!” to *What is Property?* should be clear enough.

No, apparently. Thus we get the term “Tory anarchist” to describe someone who is both a radical and a traditionalist just as we see “anarcho-capitalism” invented by Murray Rothbard to describe an ideology diametrically opposed to what anarchism actually stands for based on, significantly, an inversion on *why* we oppose the state.

And this shows why we should bother, why I even mention a book which, despite its title, has nothing to do with anarchism. For if we do not protest against these appropriations of our terms then we will lose them. This can be seen in America, where libertarian now means the exact opposite of what it did/should do. It was stolen by the laissez-faire capitalist right in the late 1950s and knowingly so:

“One gratifying aspect of our rise to some prominence is that, for the first time in my memory, we, ‘our side,’ had captured a crucial word from the enemy ... ‘Liberarians’ ... had long been simply a polite word for left-wing [sic!] anarchists, that is for anti-private property anarchists, either of the communist or syndicalist variety. But now we had taken it over...” (Rothbard, *The Betrayal of the American Right*, p. 83)

The propertarian usage is creeping into British discourse. So we see *the Guardian* using “libertarian” in the American sense to describe the May 14th pathetically tiny pro-cuts (sorry, anti-debt) get-together (sorry, demonstration): “The protest will be attended by an alliance of rightwing and libertarian activists including ... the Freedom Association, a libertarian pressure group.” No *genuine* libertarian would be siding with the state against its subjects as these *propertarians* so enthusiastically are.

Tory Anarchism can be seen as part of this debasement of what anarchism actually stands for. And we should not tolerate it for if we do then we will wake up one day to discover *libertarian* means its exact opposite in mainstream politics.

In short, when someone talks of the “anarchic humour” of, to show my age, *The Young Ones* they are not using the term anarchy in its sense of a socio-economic theory which has inspired a social movement. Much the same can be said of this book and its attempts to draw mileage from Orwell’s passing comment on Swift. Still, if you are interested in the likes of George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh, Peter Cook and Chris Morris then this book may be of interest.

Just remember that it has nothing to do with anarchism or anarchists.

I it would be remiss of me not to mention the 1998 Freedom Press book *George Orwell at Home (and among the Anarchists): Essays and Photographs*. This contains two excellent articles on Orwell and anarchism by Colin Ward and Nicolas Walter as well as *Freedom’s* obituary of Orwell by Vernon Richards. As is clear from *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell was impressed by the social revolution in Spain lead by the anarchists of the CNT-FAI.