

Anarchist library
Anti-Copyright



Bob Black
Bob Black and David Graeber
An unbridgable chasm

author,+ AJODA letters

en.anarchistlibraries.net

Bob Black and David Graeber

An unbridgable chasm

Bob Black

In 2007,¹ I wrote a review of the AK Press Publishing & Distribution Catalog. I find that sometimes I can comment usefully on a political publisher by reviewing its mail-order catalog.² The idea is that, by drawing attention to representative books, I can to some extent substantiate my critique of the publisher, without purporting to devote to particular books the attention which they may or may not deserve. My general theme was that AK Press was not an anarchist publisher, judging from the books which it published and distributed, and the books it chose not to publish or distribute.

In that review, I wrote: "And there is an anthology of 'academic scholars and engaged individuals' (yawn)

¹ "Class Struggle Social Democrats or The Press of Business," *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* No. 64 (25)(2) (Fall-Winter-2007), 26-29, available online at www.theanarchylibrary.org.

² E.g., Bob Black, "The Best Book Catalog in the World," in *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays* (Port Townsend, WA: Loompanics Unlimited, n.d. [1986]), 153-158.

co-edited by fired professor David Graeber, an example of a familiar figure on the AK scene: a social democrat who calls himself an anarchist. But anyway this is not an anarchist book.” I then knew nothing about Graeber except that he was a college professor fired by Yale for political reasons. I was not aware that he had written, to and for leftists, “The New Anarchisms,” which was an attempt to persuade leftists that anarchists were comrades too – and might be usefully used – even if they get a little wild sometimes.³ I could not then anticipate the Occupy movement or Graeber’s claim of pre-eminence in it.⁴

The once and future Professor, under a pseudonym, published a letter of rebuttal in AJODA. I published a surrebuttal there, which follows.

Is it possible, for 12 paragraphs, to rebut a critique without contradicting anything it says? Or to denounce my writing for lacking any political content whatsoever, in a letter lacking any political content whatsoever? “W.T.” – AK Press shill David Graeber (he is a Professor again, in England) – must think so. (I assume it’s Graeber, since he claims to be insulted and he’s the only one I named, but if one of his co-editors wants to take rap, that’s okay with me.⁵) Using a pseudonym while including identifying information is like closing your eyes so [that] no one can see you.

³ David Graeber, “The New Anarchists,” *New Left Review* 13 (Jan.Feb. 2002): 61-73, available online at <http://newleftreview.org/II/13/david-graeber-the-new-anarchists>.

⁴ David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013).

⁵ I contacted one of the other co-editors, someone associated with Autonomedia. She knew nothing about the letter.

Ramsey-Steele, Ward Churchill, Noam Chomsky, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Chaz Bufe, Gary Warne, Steve Schwartz, Fred Woodworth, Mark [Lucy Parsons Center], Jon Bekken, George Matiasz, walter alter, Adam Parfrey, Stewart Home, Iain McKay (“Dolly II”), *Processed World*, the Church of the SubGenius, the Heritage Foundation, NEFAC, and AK [Press itself] were unworthy of my talents, can he please nominate enemies who are worthy of my talents?

I have long deplored the poor quality of my opponents. Is Professor Graeber, perhaps, a worthy opponent? Not on this showing, but, let him send me review copies of his books. I will be happy to crush and demolish him. Indeed, I’ve made a good start on that.

For Graeber, “it’s not clear Black actually has a vision.” Certainly the Professor’s vision is clearer than mine, since he can see things that aren’t even there.

His occult third eye discerns that my critique of AK Press/Distribution refers to him as a social democrat who calls violently suppressed the party.” I wish I’d said that! It sings. But to all the rest of us, I appear to have written, “a social democrat who calls himself an anarchist.” “(And no one noticed this?)” No, Professor, because there was nothing to notice.⁶

I am so far gone that even “successfully copying five words from a catalogue” – a catalogue? – “is beyond Black’s mental capabilities.” Graeber is so far gone as to suppose that I was allowed to write for the AK Press catalogue. Even successfully copying eight words from a magazine, *AJODA*, is beyond Graeber’s mental capabilities.”

In the subsequent (2008) AK catalogue, the Professor opines that “anarchy and democracy are – or should be – largely identical.” That’s *exactly* what I meant by “a social democrat who calls himself an anarchist.” Despite what this limousine leftist asserts, I do argue about politics, because, if this claim of his about anarchy is politics, then my arguments against democracy as anarchy must also be about politics.

Graeber doesn’t deny it. He doesn’t deny anything. He just changes the subject from the political (AK Press to the personal (me). I am accused of “egopornography” for a review in which I never mention myself or any personal issues I might have with AK, by someone with a personal, pecuniary interest in his publisher AK, and whose biggest gripe is that I insulted him personally.⁷ Who’s the egocentrist here?

⁶ The *AJODA* editors explained (p. 76) that several sentences got transposed in the online version of the letter, but that was corrected within 24 hours. As they add, it should have been obvious to “WT” that there had been some such error (which does not appear in the magazine version).

⁷ There was, of course, no such personal insult, since the name David Graeber meant nothing to me. But I am pleased to supply the personal insults

More broadly, I am accused of enjoying my writing. As do, as he admits, my many readers. George Orwell, accused of the same offense, wrote a rejoinder which speaks for all of us who write well: “I Write as I Please.” My writing is not a duty, or a sacrifice, or a job, or a service to a cause. It is what I have called for work to be transformed into: productive play: at once satisfying and useful, to me and to others. I am trying to set an example. I would not expect a publish-or-perish “academic author” and “engaged intellectual” to understand this.

There are other indications that Graeber is, if sincere, then at best, reading-impaired. In my review he thought he saw an “attack on every book ever published by AK Press,” whereas I mentioned only about 15 titles, and praised one of them (*Vision on Fire*). I specifically discussed – this was maybe too sophisticated for a former Ivy League professor – why, AK being what it is, it’s paradoxically unfortunate even when, exceptionally, AK does publish (usually reprints of) real anarchist books. But I’m not going to make wild, unsupported charges against Graeber, such as good faith. His letter is an AK Press covert operation.

I am said to “make no pretense of consistency.” Unlike Graeber, I am not pretentious, but I do claim to be consistent, aside from acknowledging rare errors (in my last letter to *AJODA*, for example) and allowing for some development of my views after pondering anti-authoritarian history and practice for over 35 years.

I mentioned the well-known fact that the Black Panthers, the heroes of the 2007 catalog, were, among other shortcomings, sexist. Professor Graeber does not deny this. He does not deny anything. Rather he accuses me of sexism too, as if “you’re another” was a rational argument.

Even if it were, I’m not “another.” He quotes a quip I made about 30 years ago about feminists (the feminists of 30 years

now.

ago) as if it were a quip about women. But only feminists, and not even the reasonable among them, have ever confused women with feminists. I’ve always loved women, but I have long criticized feminists. Graeber’s is the kind of vanguardist, substitutionist thinking⁸ which is just below the surface of the guided democracy of anarcho-leftists like Graeber and the Platformists and the syndicalists.

“Being nice all the time,” sighs Graeber, “can become exhausting” – how sanctimonious from someone who is not at all nice to me, who imputes malign motives which he is in no position to know about, and who assumes that as an anarchist I am, like him only a writer. This ignores my street actions against *Processed World* (see *The Baby and the Bathwater*), the first Gulf War (see *Friendly Fire*), and perhaps others it would be imprudent to disclose. Graeber, I notice, does not mention having himself done anything other than write. Now there is nothing wrong with just writing. But there’s something wrong with just writing while falsely and hypocritically denouncing me for just writing.

Professor Graeber can’t keep his story straight. On the one hand, I am unreadable. My attacks “are no longer funny” and “my prose is often completely incomprehensible,” only occasionally “producing a coherent sentence.” On the other hand, because “nastiness is fun” (doesn’t that imply that I am still funny?), because my style is the predominant style in anarchist writing (regrettably not so), I am deplorably popular, “many anarchists not only read, but enjoy his work.” I am unreadable, and I am too widely read.

Professor Graeber complains of my “making a show of crushing and demolishing a (usually imaginary) opponent for the sheer fun of it.” For the fun of it, yes, but not for the *sheer* fun of it. If the Professor thinks that those I have crushed and demolished, such as Murray Bookchin, Jeremy Rifkin, David

⁸ His parents were Communist Party members.