

A Critical Consideration of my Critical Consideration

EF

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It's been explained to me that every writer—whether of highbrow novels or online internet discourse—always has one or two things they've written that they dislike and which haunts them. For me that piece is “A Critical Consideration of Hensley’s Appalachian Anarchism,” which is a response to Dakota Hensley’s article “Appalachian Anarchism: What the Voting Record Conceals.” I do not fundamentally disagree with anything I wrote in said response, but rather I take issue with *how* I wrote it and what I omitted or did not expand upon. I blame these errors primarily on the facts that 1) there are *two* versions of the article floating around. I wrote one in 2020 but felt after a year that it was incomplete, so I penned an ‘updated and expanded edition’ to replace it. One important reason I felt this way was because in that original piece I used language like “womxn” and “transgenderism” that I later learned were commonly used by TERFs, but there were plenty of other motivators. 2) There were certain topics around which my position as a white settler from a bourgeois background put blinders on me that I did not do the proper work to acknowledge and work through. For example—as was later amended in the second version—I attempted to point out Indigenous peoples overlooked in Hensley’s assessment of Appalachia. However, I failed to do the proper research and... well read the amendment: “[t]he author has chosen to remove reference to the ‘Appalachian Cherokee Nation’ on the basis of complaints by members of the Cherokee Identity Protection Committee against said nation for allegedly misrepresenting or falsifying Cherokee heritage in the pursuit of federal recognition. The author, as a non-Indigenous person, does not feel it is appropriate to voice an opinion on this, but it would be irresponsible to leave it up as is.” 3) I am not good at nor do I enjoy writing personally-pointed articles. On top of all of that, the updated and expanded version has numerous typos (not unusual for my writing but it still bothers me), many of the paragraphs are either too long or too short (leading to an unbalanced formatting), and I make use of some vague terminology I now dislike such as “uncritical Anglo-American traditionalism;” an attempt to summarize the specific form of settler-colonial, white supremacist culture in the United States. But beyond the issues already noted, I want to specifically critically expand upon my thoughts in that critical consideration about Christianity and anti-communism.

Hensley argues that the cultural ideology of Appalachia is “Christian anarchist in that faith is held dear to Appalachians who let the Bible guide them, despite 70% being unchurched and

their native Christianity being decentralized and opposed to religious hierarchy and established churches.” And I agree with him that Christianity (and, I would add, post-Christian traditions) can and should help lay the basis for any number of anarchist projects—even expanding his ideas with those of Gary Chartier, Leo Tolstoy, and David Fleming.¹ However, I fail to *really* account for how Christianity could take up such a role. Certainly the Protestant suspicion toward clerical hierarchy and religious institutionalism gives much hope, but the mere fact that most (white) Evangelicals in the U.S. have significantly rallied behind Trump and the not-so-crypto-fascist MAGA Republican movement demonstrates that human decency and human liberation are not inevitable conclusions for Protestantism in the United States. I would therefore argue that the ‘opposition to established churches’ referenced earlier can actually be *unhelpful* in turning Protestant Christianity toward its more humane and progressive interpretations. Look no further than the Civil Rights Movement in the United States: Measha Ferguson-Smith writes how “[c]ountless Black preachers claimed that the Bible, especially the Gospels, called Christians to work for the betterment of African Americans. They preached that true Christianity demanded attention to and effort toward the liberation of oppressed peoples and the recognition of our innate equality in God’s eyes, as beings created in his image.” She goes further to outline three key ways in which Christianity underpinned and mobilized the Civil Rights Movement: for one, the strategies of nonviolent resistance extend far further back than Mahatma Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau, with their origin lying in the New Testament—particularly the Gospels. More on the ground, the “Black Church” also formed an essential role as a center of community and in that role was “able to harness inspirational preaching and to translate it into deliberate action; in this way, it served to mobilize parishes, towns, and even cities” and “provided much of the rationale and motivation for the liberation activities.” And, of course, religious community was an enormous factor in shaping individual radicals and activists like Martin Luther King. Similar things can likely be said of the entire Southern Christian Leadership conference; and perhaps particularly the famous Quaker communist Bayard Rustin.

With this in mind, particularly if we think of religion as—from Thomas Jay Oord’s review of *A Philosophy of Christian Materialism*—“a fidelity that engages material loyalties and commitments within the social, economic, and political spheres,” it is clearly the community and the continuity thereof that facilitates (in this case Protestant) Christianity toward truly liberatory ends; or reactionary ones; i.e. the Westboro Baptist Church or any mainline Protestant churches aligned with the Christian right. Further and more positive models of this can be found in the egalitarian and progressive radicalism of the Religious Society of Friends, Unitarian Universalists, liberal and progressive churches in, to use two examples, the Episcopal and Lutheran traditions, and congregations engaging in post-MLK Black Liberation Theology. This is why, in my updated version, I tied in the idea of a Christian anarchism in Appalachia to Fleming’s argument that, as I restate, “religious culture—such as Appalachian Christianity—will be a central tool in creating a common context of trust, transparency, congruence, and collective decision making after the failure of the state and the collapse of the capitalist economy.” So, while I firmly hold up the “priesthood of all believers” and the necessity of a unique, individual relationship with scripture, whether or not any particular form of Christianity can facilitate a left-wing anti-capitalist politics is a matter of

¹ There is much I want to say on the subject of Christianity, Protestantism, and radical religious politics as I have only hinted at my religious views here and there. I intend to write a much longer piece on these topics in the near future.

community. If there is to be a Christian anarchism in Appalachia or anywhere, then it must be built upon real material communities open to unrepressed theological and political dialogue.²

Turning to the topic of anti-communism, Hensley argues that Appalachian culture is anarchistically “individualist in its opposition to communism and acceptance of self-reliance and self-sufficiency.” In response, I point out how ‘communism’ in the rural U.S. is often just as radically misunderstood as anarchism. As such, the resulting kneejerk anti-‘communism’ could form a major barrier to collective projects around, for example, commons-based resource management, and is often a dogwhistle for antisemitism and (anti-Black) racism. Additionally, a “Red Scare” politics could easily be used as a weapon against, as both Hensley and I assess, *extremely important* Appalachian labor organizing, but I would add a further point: opposition to communism potentially leads to a rejection of material analysis—Marxist or otherwise—which I believe is a necessary lens for any and all radical projects. For example: I point out how a “conservative anarchism” (another descriptor Hensley uses for “Appalachian anarchism”) is untenable because of the manner in which—through both an inability to critically assess everything from white supremacy to settler-colonialism and its outright queerphobia—it creates ostensibly ‘nonviolent’ conspiracies (a less ‘buzzy’ term for systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) that restrict people’s freedoms. My belief therefore is that a necessary part of any anti-statist project is that we pursue non-conservative ‘thick’ values such as sex-positivity (the example I use in the critical consideration) beyond just the opposition to physical violence. The reason I bring this up is because in another piece of mine titled “Materialism and Thick Libertarianism” I attempt to demonstrate how, from a dialectical/historical materialist perspective, intentional (but still largely spontaneous) alterations to material conditions lead to thicker community values like anti-racism and environmentalism. My argument here is therefore that if anti-communism leads to a rejection of reading Karl Marx (or Mikhail Bakunin or Murray Bookchin etc.) and utilizing material analysis, I have serious doubts as to the ‘ease’ by which the important social trends necessary for anarchism may be properly grasped and implemented.³ More needs to be said on this topic by someone more deeply entrenched in Appalachia than myself—who grew up around the western edge of the North Central subregion—but, in conclusion: that’s all I wanted to say on the matter and now I can rest a little easier.

² It may seem, on the surface, odd to position community as the center of what is ultimately meant to be politics in the lineage of individualist anarchism, but it is quite in line with the sort of community-centric projects of early North American mutualists like Josiah Warren as well as with the sentiment of his student Benjamin Tucker that “[w]e do *not* believe that any one can ‘stand alone.’ We do wish ‘social ties and guarantees.’ We wish all there are. We believe in human solidarity. We believe that the members of society are interdependent. We would preserve these interdependencies untrammelled and inviolate.”

³ I am not one, unlike some vulgar Marxists, to say that dialectical and historical materialism (or ‘naturalism’ when it comes to Bookchin) are the be-all and end-all of science, philosophy, and general analysis. The universe is far too terrifyingly complex and incomprehensible than that. However, I stand by the idea that its core elements such as context-keeping, centering the means of production, the base-superstructure model, theories of cultural hegemony, and so on are crucial to all projects on a very practical level.

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