

A Structured Anarchism by John Griffin

Jeff Shantz

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A Structured Anarchism by John Griffin. London: Freedom Press, n.d., 37 Pp.

John Griffin's short book from the venerable Freedom Press, *A Structured Anarchism*, represents an attempt to address perceived shortcomings of anarchist analysis with regard to matters of sociology, psychology and economics which the author finds to be generally "weak and un-systematic" (5). In reading the text it is clear that of these concerns Griffin is most interested in questions of economy, devoting all but three of the nine chapters to questions of production, exchange and capitalist organization.

The author's stated intention is to sharpen anarchist analysis in light of its current position as "sole bearer of a useful critique of all authoritarian and exploitative societies" (5) given the recent troubles of world communism and Marxist theory. Underlying Griffin's discussion is a debate between collectivist (Proudhonian small market economics, consumption related to work) and communist (Kropotkinian non-waged, money-less relations) perspectives. While preferring collectivist alternative economics in the present, since he sees this as more readily attainable, Griffin seems to recognize that widespread social improvement is impossible without the overthrow of capitalism. Unfortunately, a turn in Griffin's analysis relating to his sociological understanding leads him away from offering many insights into how this overthrow might be effected, or even how capitalism operates.

Griffin's attention to such seemingly academic matters as sociology and psychology is interesting especially since the author is not an academic, a fact which may explain the clarity of his writing. The idea of discussing anarchism in relation to sociological theory is a compelling one, especially given the usually overlooked historical engagements between anarchists and the "founders" of sociology, notably Karl Marx, Emile Durkeim and Max Weber. Certainly, both the anarchists and the early sociologists were responding, in different ways, to the same changing conditions being ushered in by industrial capitalism in 19th century Europe. Moreover, the founders of sociology and anarchists were directly engaged with one another, often in pitched battles. (One story I've heard tells of the anarchists of the Munich Soviet of 1919 chasing Weber out of town before he could give a speech.)

Unfortunately, rather than exploring the engagement between anarchists and sociologists and the debates between them (which along with anarchist theory have been written out of

sociological history), Griffin wastes this chapter on a rather unconvincing criticism of Marx's analysis of class. Griffin argues for the abandonment of "working class" as a core theoretical concept given the difficulties of definition in the current context. Griffin goes so far (too far) as to call class a "chimera" (10). He suggests strangely that an analysis of class "inevitably distracts attention from the core concern of all anarchists, namely the authority and power which sustains those who rule" (11). While not all power flows from class in our society, still it remains one of the principal relations underpinning rulership, as recent protests against the WTO, World Bank and IMF remind us. In place of an analysis of class, which he regards as nebulous, Griffin prefers the bourgeois sociology of Durkheim which turns from class to the truly nebulous notion of community.

In fact, in place of the more precise discussions around class and its changing character, Griffin substitutes more oblique notions of "community harmony." Elsewhere he makes the dubious suggestions that anarchists shift attention to the "psychology which gives rise to" power (36) since the "real revolution lies with the individual." Anarchy as pop psychology or advertising.

Griffin's analysis of the market and money as aspects of unconscious drives and authoritarian compulsions, rather than as outcomes of real practices of accumulation and competitive social relations is neither convincing nor particularly insightful in terms of helping us to overcome those relations. Asking capitalists to be nicer will not turn the trick. His discussion presents money as simply a convenient medium of exchange rather than a complex relation with respect to social labor and he seems to buy the hype that markets are self-regulated by supply and demand. As a result he cannot see beyond a petty bourgeois version of anarchist society with money as the primary means to ensure work and relate consumption to work done.

The rest of Griffin's socioeconomic discussion consists of constructing his argument for collectivist economics, weighing its benefits against capitalism and identifying the problems it poses. Here Griffin drifts down the path of alternative economics, and like many proponents of LETS, barter and "green production" substitutes his abiding enthusiasm for an analysis of how capitalism must impede and "co-opt" such projects. Overcoming capitalism is not simply a matter of good intentions and lovely schemes.

Despite the problems of analysis, there are within the text sections which will interest readers. These include the organization of communes in Spain between 1936-1939, the Mondragon cooperatives in Spain and the Scott Bader Commonwealth in England. Syndicalists will be quite familiar with these efforts, and highly critical of the latter two especially, but Griffin provides a serviceable introduction for the unfamiliar.

A secondary emphasis in Griffin's work concerns the social psychological mechanisms by which state and capital instill authoritarian cultural values. Griffin draws upon the work of non-anarchists Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm. While providing a useful synopsis of the psychoanalysts' main ideas, this section does not provide a satisfactory accounting of authoritarianism. The Freudian emphasis on the subconscious is accorded too great a place in the discussion while analysis of social structures and relations (which were crucial both for Reich and Fromm) are downplayed.

Likewise, in seeking to overcome authoritarianism, Griffin implores us to "look within ourselves," (14) which is certainly part of a response but as the sixties old new agers showed is no solution. Notions that the destruction of the environment, economic exploitation and social crises result from some "mindless drive," (31) or represent "an expression of the thought patterns of the powerful" (32) are of little analytic value.

Some of this reads like a “self-help” book and Griffin’s suggestion that anarchists “consult an analyst” (15), a rather authoritarian role itself, completely turned me off. In the end, however, I can agree with Griffin that the lived experience of oppression is more important in the formation of authoritarian drives than is media propaganda. I just wish he had paid it more attention in his analysis. Griffin’s attempt to deal seriously with the difficult questions around social organization, workers’ control and non-capitalist exchange is welcome. Unfortunately his analysis is so weakened by his insufficient understanding of class and capitalist social relations that the work ultimately fails in its stated goal of developing a strong, systematic anarchist understanding of sociology and economics.

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Alternate Routes: A Journal of Critical Social Research, 17. 2001.
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