

An Anarchist FAQ

Review

Jon Bekken

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Iain McKay, **An Anarchist FAQ** Volume 1 (AK Press, 2008), 555 pages, \$25 paper. Volume 2 (AK Press, 2012), 561 pages, \$25 paper.

This two-volume compilation includes the great bulk of the material assembled online in the Anarchist FAQ by *ASR* contributor Iain McKay and other comrades over more than a decade. Established to confront misrepresentations of anarchism that have proliferated particularly in the online universe (allegedly anarchist tendencies exist there that have no apparent manifestation in the material world in which the rest of us live), AFAQ quickly evolved into a much broader overview of anarchism, as a social movement and as a set of ideas.

It is impossible to do justice to the 1,136 pages in these two volumes. Volume 1 opens (after three introductions which explain the origins and evolution of the project) with an overview of anarchism, followed by sections explaining why anarchists oppose hierarchy, capitalism and the state; summarizing the anarchist critique of capitalist economics; reviewing how statism and capitalism operate as an intertwined system of exploitation and oppression; offering an anarchist analysis of the ecological crisis, and refuting the notion that there could be some sort of “anarcho”-capitalism. An appendix reviews the origins of three major anarchist symbols: the black flag, the red-and-black flag and the circled A. Volume 2 opens with a survey of individualist anarchism, which remains implacably hostile to capitalism despite its differences with the social anarchism embraced by most anarchists; followed by an explanation of why anarchists (who McKay rightly insists are part of the broader socialist movement) reject state socialism; an overview of anarchist thinking about the shape of a future, free society; a section addressing contemporary anarchist practice (involvement in social struggles, direct action, organizational approaches, alternative social organizations, child rearing, and social revolution); followed by a brief bibliography.

Each major section is divided into smaller sections and subsections (presented in question form and using an outline numbering system that probably works better online) addressing specific aspects of the topic. The writing and organization are clear, if rarely captivating, and the tone is reasoned and constructive. However, at times, McKay does show his exasperation with the persistent misrepresentations of the Marxists and the “anarcho”-capitalists (who, as he rightly points out, have nothing whatsoever to do with anarchism and receive attention here far out of proportion to their actual significance in the world in large part because of their early adoption of and highly vocal presence on the Internet). Evidently, the ravings of the “anarcho”-primitivists

have received less attention online and so they pass unmentioned here. As the book is devoted to political and social thought and action, there is also virtually no attention given to anarchist tendencies in art and literature, or to the post-modern “anarchisms” which dominate so much academic publishing on the subject of late.

McKay and his fellow contributors give serious consideration even to anarchist tendencies with which they clearly disagree. Thus, platformism, syndicalism and synthesis all receive respectful treatment, presenting the arguments proffered for and against. Thus, Bookchin’s libertarian municipalism is presented on its own terms before a short critical assessment (1092–93). (This tolerant policy can extend too far, as with the citations to the notorious police informer Bob Black, who can evidently be excerpted to make it appear as if he has a coherent social analysis, though nothing could be further from the truth.) Here and throughout the two volumes there is heavy reliance on direct quotations. The FAQ draws upon and tends to synthesize a wide array of (primarily anarchist) sources, in keeping with its broader mission of presenting a broad anarchist approach to a general public, rather than exploring differences within the movement or advocating for a particular school of thought. The emphasis is definitely upon the classics of anarchist thought, but McKay and his contributors have read widely and include citations not only to anarchist writers but also to social scientists and historians whose work tends (whether intended to or not) to bolster the anarchist position.

By way of summation, and to give a bit of the flavor of the whole, I will briefly discuss Section I: What would an anarchist society look like? This 168-page section is broken up into subsections on libertarian socialism, a discussion of the balance between the insanity of drafting blueprints for the future and thinking about the sort of society we wish to build, considerations of the structural aspects of an anarchist economy and an anarchist society, consideration of how an anarchist economy might function, a review of the Spanish Revolution as an example of anarchism in practice (if also under severe constraints), and short discussions of the balance between individualism and society and the so-called Tragedy of the Commons.

This is a lot of terrain to cover, but the questions are essential. McKay’s discussion is grounded in the classics, and (correctly) presuppose that anarchism represents a particular strand of socialism, quoting Bakunin:

We are convinced that freedom without socialism is privilege and injustice, and that socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality. (839)

The text then methodically establishes the necessity of socialism, the practicality of our vision, explains why any lover of freedom must reject markets, and refutes the absurd (but oft-preached) notion that capitalism distributes social resources efficiently. And that’s just the first 30 pages. The section refutes mainstream economists’ critiques of self-management (critiques based not on examining actual practice but rather on mental exercises based on assumptions that nowhere exist), and reviews the long history of self-management in practice.

However, as McKay argues, social ownership of the means of life, and of production, is essential to any meaningful freedom. While anarchists have advocated for different methods for distributing the product of our necessarily social labor, and hence for different systems for organizing the economy, all anarchist visions are necessarily based upon social ownership and free access to the means of production. McKay explores the ways in which overlapping federations of syndicates and associations (most organized for specific purposes, as anarchists have generally

been skeptical of schemes which try to centralize the entire sphere of human life into a single, totalized organization) can cooperate to meet the incredibly varied range of human needs and desires.

Throughout, McKay raises and refutes the objections we have all heard a thousand times, not only theoretically but with extensive examples from real life (something far more congenial to anarchist theory than to the doctrines of either the capitalists or the state socialists). Anarchism, he shows (like Kropotkin and Dolgoff before) offers an eminently practical approach ideally suited to coordinating large, complex societies.

My main objection to this section is the part where McKay suggests (to quote the title) that “anarchists desire to abolish work.” In the actual text, he is more clear, noting that

Work (in the sense of doing necessary things or productive activity) will always be with us. There is no getting away from it; crops need to be grown, schools built, homes fixed, and so on. No, work in this context means any form of labor in which the worker does not control his or her own activity.

But what purpose is served by using commonly understood terms such as “work” in so technical a way? It must necessarily lead to confusion, on the one hand, and on the other enable charlatans such as the aforementioned Bob Black to sneak their obfuscations into the anarchist camp. Far better to speak of wage slavery, or, as Chomsky often does, to authoritarianism in the economic sphere.

Far too much of our labor is of course wasted under present arrangements, and our workplaces are sites of subjugation and misery. In an economy controlled by workers and organized around meeting human needs, we could soon slash the work week to 16 hour or less, reorganize workplaces to make them both safer and more fulfilling, abolish the ruthless division of labor that has some think and others serving as the minions of those who decide, and redirect the entire sphere of production in fundamental ways. This would transform our relation to our work, as well as to the products of our labor. But while we might well take genuine pleasure from joining with our fellow workers to fulfill our needs and our desires, not all work will be pleasurable in and of itself, as is suggested here.

Anarchists have not come to agreement as to how production will be coordinated and social priorities decided upon, and so McKay leaves these questions open (while discussing some of the leading proposals). This is an issue *ASR* has been exploring in our series on anarchist economics, and which I suspect is at the root of the otherwise inexplicable attraction many feel to the Parecon scheme. Personally, I find Kropotkin’s treatment of these issues more compelling, even if it is a century old. *AFAQ* does effectively integrate the experience of the Spanish Revolution (also presented in a well-crafted 31-page section that concludes this chapter) into the discussion. But in general, I fear the pluralistic approach embraced in this treatment – while capturing the diversity of the movement – undermines the coherence of the argument, as well as eliding the congruence between our broader social visions and the means we advocate that is one of the unique strengths of the anarcho-syndicalist approach.

In short, McKay and his fellow contributors have made a substantial contribution in creating and maintaining the online introduction to anarchism, and refutation of the endless objections of those who can not conceive of a society free of oppression and exploitation. It will serve as an invaluable reference to those unfamiliar with our ideas and our movement, or to those who have

recently embraced anarchism but have yet to explore and reflect upon the tradition. However, its breadth and pluralism are both its greatest strength and its most notable weakness.

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