

Review: Everything you ever wanted to know about anarchism

Anarchism by Daniel Guerin (Monthly Review Press) £4.95

Kathleen O'Kelly

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Alternatively this book could be called “All you ever wanted to know about Anarchism but were afraid to ask”. After reading Guerin’s “Anarchism” you’ll be a convinced anarchist, armed with lots of arguments and examples to throw at the Leninists. This book is an easy reading introduction to the main ideas in anarchist thought and the events that have helped to form them. It is divided into three sections, Anarchist theory, Anarchist economy and Anarchists in revolutionary practice.

In part one Guerin discusses the anarchist’s objections to the state, bourgeois democracy and authoritarian socialism. In particular Guerin focuses on the difference between anarchism and other strands of socialism. This difference is well illustrated by the discussion on the importance of individual freedom within society.

There is a common fear that socialism will destroy individuality. This fear is partly based on the tendency of many socialists to discuss socialism purely in terms of the benefits to ‘society’. The anarchist emphasis on the individual highlights a different vision of a future society which aims to liberate the individual and delight in people’s differences.

Guerin gives a real example of this commitment to individual freedom. On the eve of the Spanish revolution, the CNT (Confederacion Nacional de Trabajadores – a mass anarcho-syndicalist union) passed a motion to allow naturist and nudist communes “unsuited to industrialisation” negotiate special economic agreements with the other agricultural and industrial communes.

In part two, Guerin discusses anarchism in more concrete terms. He describes a libertarian society organised on two levels; economically in the form of a federation of self-managing workers’ associations; and territorially in the form of a federation of communes. Proudhon saw this form of organisation, which is organised but with no centralised authority, as “the highest degree of liberty and order to which humanity can aspire”.

Part three of this book takes a more historical view of Anarchism in practice. The constraints of an introductory book mean that this is a very brief overview of events. Guerin looks at the involvement of Anarchists during the Russian revolution, including the events at Kronstadt, the Makhnovista and the attempts of the Bolsheviks to suppress Anarchists and their ideas.

The story in Spain was quite different. Despite the threat of fascism, the Spanish revolution of 1936 was far more libertarian. Anarchism had a strong tradition in Spain so the revolution shows us some anarchist ideas in practice. Guerin looks at the attempts at self-management in agriculture and industry. He also looks at the political factors that brought the revolution to an end.

What is interesting in this account of the Russian and Spanish revolution is the criticisms levelled at the anarchists themselves. Although the actions of the Bolshevik party are rightly condemned, the anarchists are far from idealised. Their failings in revolutionary practice are highlighted rather than hidden. This honesty enables us to learn from mistakes in the past and adds to the development of anarchist politics.

Guerin's book explains the main ideas of anarchism simply and concisely without portraying anarchists as infallible. It shows the development of these ideas and the internal debates that have existed within anarchism. If you want to find out that Anarchism doesn't mean chaos, that they don't all wear black capes and that there is a socialist alternative to the Leninists, then read "Anarchism".

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