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George Woodcock

A Muddled History of Anarchism

Sam Wiener

1963, Fall

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George Woodcock's *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (New York & Cleveland, World Publishing Co., 1962)

A serious history of Anarchism in English is most timely, for there is a revival of interest in our ideas everywhere, and our English movement is growing. The author was once an active Anarchist and has written extensively on the subject. This book, therefore, is regarded as authoritative and is widely used in academic circles.

The author has made available for the first time in English historical data from French, Italian, German and Spanish sources. He gives biographical sketches of Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Stirner, Tolstoy and others. Woodcock discusses their ideas—correcting popular misconceptions of Anarchism which confuse Anarchism with Nihilism, bomb throwing and general chaos. He points out that Anarchism claims to be a constructive theory for the regeneration of society and that it is destructive only insofar as it aims to remove the parasitic institutions which block progress.

A historical work reveals as much about the author's state of mind as it does about the facts which he records. A careful reading of his book indicates that Woodcock is confused. He rejects Anarchism as a practical alternative to Statism. At the same time he has not given up his objections to the State. Unable to work out a consistent viewpoint of his own, he becomes enmeshed in his own contradictions.

For example, Woodcock criticises the Anarchists for "the weakness of their practical proposals for the society that would follow their hypothetical revolution." Two pages later he contradicts himself: "the Anarchist movement showed a concrete aspect of libertarianism that at least sketched out an alternative to the totalitarian way." (pages 472, 474)

Woodcock devotes five pages (393–398) to the constructive achievements of the Anarchists in reorganising economic and social life during the Spanish Revolution. He even admits that "the Anarchist methods of organising economic and social relations turned out to be at least as practical as authoritarian methods." All competent observers, including non-Anarchists, are agreed that Anarchist reconstruction was more efficient than under the authoritarian nightmare and had the supreme virtue of combining good administration with freedom and equality. Woodcock also identifies Anarchist tendencies in various popular communal movements in different parts of the world.

If one wanted to demonstrate the practicability of Anarchism he would find plenty of examples in Woodcock's book—anyone except Woodcock. He says, "Such scattered examples of constructive Anarchist efforts do not prove that a complete Anarchist society, such as Kropotkin, for example, envisaged can come into existence or that it would work if it did." (see pages 472-74-75)

Woodcock is referring to Kropotkin's *Conquest of Bread*, a work not intended to be the final blueprint of a final Anarchist society. He only wanted to demonstrate how Anarchist principles could be applied to practical problems. Nowhere

libertarian organisation to effect their emancipation from wage slavery and the State. The tenor of Woodcock's book is that Anarchism is suitable only for a relatively simple society, requiring comparatively rudimentary forms of social organisation. He no longer thinks that Anarchism is applicable to modern complex industrial society which requires intricate organisation. Self-imprisoned in the "ivory tower" of fictitious "pure" Anarchism, Woodcock consoles himself with a semi-religious mystique of personal salvation.

Woodcock's book is the political testament of a disillusioned man.

– Sam Wiener

Space limitations have made it impossible to go into Woodcock's misinterpretations and distortions of the thought of Kropotkin and Proudhon.

does Woodcock tell why Kropotkin was wrong. Yet, a host of modern thinkers, including Erich Fromm, Martin Buber, Ashley Montague, Lewis Mumford, Daniel Guérin in their re-examination of socialist thought find practical alternatives to Statism in the Anarchist classics and libertarian social structures.

Woodcock again contradicts himself on the matter of anarchist participation in the Loyalist Government during the Spanish Civil War. On page 391 he correctly denounces the anarchist leaders for joining the governments of Madrid and Barcelona. This violation of basic anarchist principles led to the defeat of the revolution. Yet in the section dealing with events

leading up to the Civil War, Woodcock shows strong sympathy for the advocates of governmental collaboration as against such "extremists" as Durruti, Ascaso and other comrades of the F.A.I. (Iberian Anarchist Federation). He even slanders the consistent anarchists as "extremists who (in 1933) engineered with an almost totalitarian intolerance" the expulsion of the collaborationist faction from the C.N.T. (see page 385).

Primo De Rivera became dictator of Spain in 1923. Woodcock says that the dictator "had no prejudices against the working class as such" and then tells how De Rivera made a united front with the reformist UGT section of the working class to crush the revolutionary CNT working class movement (pages 379–80).

Woodcock stresses the point that the Aragon Front remained static primarily because the Anarchist Columns "lacked the necessary discipline and authority needed for a long war" and in the same paragraph contradicts himself by saying that the Anarchist units were "starved for arms owing to the policy of the Republican government" (pages 390–91).

"1939 marks the real death in Spain of the Anarchist movement," says Woodcock, his reason being that the Anarchists did not defend Barcelona, the citadel of Spanish Anarchism. All participants and historians without exception agree that

a last-ditch defence of Barcelona would have meant suicide not only for the Anarchists but for the civilian population. The revolution was lost and the Civil War was almost over. The people were exhausted and dispirited and could fight no longer against imminent air bombardment by the international fascist air armada. No Anarchist has the right to purchase glory by condemning unwilling people to unwilling martyrdom. Throughout his book Woodcock condemns violence and needless slaughter. Why does he reverse himself in the case of the Spanish Anarchists?

The Spanish Anarchists made many mistakes, as they themselves admit, but they cannot be charged with lack of valour. Our Spanish comrades do not need the hopeless defence of Barcelona to establish their reputation for bravery and self-sacrifice. For three years they and their comrades-in-arms withstood the might of German, Italian and Franco armies. The socialist and communist parties, who controlled the strongest sections of the European labour movement, gave no effective help from the outside and sabotaged the revolution from the inside. What died was not the Anarchist movement but the conscience of the world. With the defeat of the Spanish Revolution came World War II, the counter-revolution of the State, the threat of nuclear war III, and what we hope will be only the temporary eclipse of the entire socialist and humanist movements. No responsible historian has the right to ignore or underestimate this all-important phase of the situation. For Woodcock to do so indicates an almost unpardonable lack of perspective.

Woodcock makes the surprising statement that “the Anarchists who followed Bakunin and Kropotkin were political and social absolutists, and they displayed an infinite contempt for piecemeal reform or the kind of improvements in living conditions and wages which trade unions sought and benevolent employers offered” (page 472).

Woodcock devastatingly refutes himself in the chapters dealing with both the Anarcho-Syndicalist and Anar-

sations. Even if every inhabitant were a convinced Anarchist, “pure” Anarchism would be impossible for technical and functional reasons alone,

Woodcock’s argumentation reveals a misconception of Anarchist theory. An Anarchist society would be a flexible, pluralistic society where all the myriad needs of mankind would be supplied through the infinite varieties of human association. The world is full of “affinity” groups from propaganda clubs to dog fanciers. Such groups can be loosely or informally organised; they are dissolved and reformed according to the fluctuating whims and fancies of the making of goods, food, clothing, housing etc. and the rendering of indispensable public services such as transportation are ever-present necessities which must be rendered at all times without fail. These functions require stable intricate organisations. The personnel may change and the enterprises may be reorganised to meet new technological improvements and expanding social needs. A person, for example, may belong at one and the same time to a number of informal associations and a highly organised federation of post office syndicates. This is not a contradiction. It merely expresses man’s many-sided preferences and physical necessities.

The form of organisation is determined by need. There is room for all forms of organisation and everyone must be free to choose his own. The Anarchist thinkers were concerned with finding the structural basis for social, individual and collective freedom. The Anarchists favour a decentralised, federative type of organisation which will provide the necessary coordination with the greatest possible amount of freedom. Libertarian organisation is not a deviation. It is the very essence of Anarchism as a viable social system. There is no “pure” Anarchism. There is only the application of anarchist principles to the realities of social life.

The erroneous idea that stable organisations and federations on a wide scale are incompatible with Anarchism could not appeal to the workers who need precisely this type of

Woodcock thinks that the Anarchists failed to achieve even the limited objective of weakening the state anywhere because they could not “compete” with the Marxists who were more opportunistic and knew how to win the people over to their side. What Woodcock ignores is the all-important fact that the Marxists did not achieve their objective either. In the process of becoming top-level statesmen, the Marxists had to give up their socialist principles and became the greatest obstacle to its achievement. The Marxist parties deserted the socialist movement and made common cause with its greatest enemy, the State. The Anarchists and associated libertarian movements had to carry on the fight alone against the reinforced might of the State capitalist counter-revolution. Woodcock has no right to blame the Anarchist movement for refusing to purchase power at the expense of principle.

Woodcock makes an artificial distinction between what he calls “pure anarchism” and Anarcho-Syndicalism. “Pure” Anarchism is defined as “the loose and flexible affinity group” which needs no formal organisation and carries on anarchist propaganda “through an invisible network of personal contacts and intellectual influences’ Anarcho-Syndicalism, on the other hand, is not Anarchistic because it needs “relatively stable organisations—because the world is only partly governed by Anarchist ideals and must make compromises with the day to day situations—has to maintain the allegiance of the mass of workers who are only remotely conscious of the final aim of Anarchism (therefore) the relative success of Anarcho-Syndicalism is no Anarchist triumph” (pages 273–274).

If these statements are true, then “pure” Anarchism is a pipe dream. Firstly because there will never be a time when everybody will be a “pure” Anarchist and humanity will forever have to “make compromises with the day to day situation.” Secondly, because the intricate economic and social functions of an interdependent world cannot be carried on without stable organi-

chist movements of France, Spain, Italy, England and the United States. The Declaration of Principles of the Anarcho-Syndicalist International lays the greatest stress on the importance of immediate demands. Article 3 reads:

“The double task of revolutionary Syndicalism—on the one hand it pursues the daily revolutionary struggle for the economic, social and intellectual improvement of the working class within the framework of existing society...”

This quote comes from the appendix to Woodcock’s pamphlet *Anarchy Or Chaos* (page 122), published when he was a convinced follower of Bakunin and Kropotkin.

Woodcock’s insinuations in characterising certain people and interpreting some events borders on vilification and outright distortion. For example:

The act of hungry workers who illegally entered bakeries and took bread for their starving families is called “pillaging and plundering” (page 304). Among the “pillagers and plunderers” were Louise Michel and Emile Pouget.

“The fascination that Nechayev wielded over Bakunin seems to be due to a submerged touch of homosexuality” (page 172).

Skillfully phrased slander.

“But it (the Haymarket bomb) would never have been thrown and Parsons and Spies would never have been hanged, if it had not been for the exhortations to violence that poured forth from Most’s *Die Freiheit* during the critical years 1883 and 1886” (page 464). Bullshit!

“The Spanish Anarchist tended easily to assassination” (page 375). This is a lie!

“In Barcelona there arose a whole class of’ pistoleros (hired murderers) who shifted from side to side, sometimes fighting for the Anarchists, sometimes for the employers and even the police” (page 376). This is a vicious falsehood!

The Anarchists formed volunteer squads to protect their comrades from the assassins. These and other remarks scat-

tered throughout the book display a bias unworthy of any historian.

The chapter on Bakunin is entitled “The Destructive Urge.” Woodcock’s caricature of Bakunin rivals E.H. Carr’s, who also did a hatchet job on Alexander Herzen and his circle. Bakunin emerges as an impractical, irresponsible eccentric, a romantic conniver, a revolutionary adventurer, bent on bloodshed and destruction. It is impossible to square this caricature with Woodcock’s statement that “Bakunin was the builder of the Anarchist movement” (our emphasis). While Woodcock discusses the major works of Godwin, Proudhon, Kropotkin, Stirner and Tolstoy, he does not even list Bakunin’s principal writings! Bakunin’s preeminent place in the history of the revolutionary movement does not rest on his personal eccentricities nor even on his revolutionary exploits. His permanent contributions to socialist thought are contained in such great theoretical, philosophic and tactical works as *Statism and Anarchy*, *The Knouto-Germanic Empire* and *The Social Revolution*, *The Policy of the International*, and in his polemical debates with the foremost social thinkers of his time.

Bakunin’s ideas about the libertarian reconstruction of society are barely mentioned. Woodcock says very little about Bakunin’s devastating critique of the Marxist theories of the State and the dynamics of social change, that he was one of the pioneers of the Anarcho-Syndicalist tendency in the international labour movement, his realistic approach to the problems of agrarian revolution, his realisation that Anarchists must emerge from their ivory tower and become a movement of the people fighting with them and spreading the seeds of Anarchism among the oppressed.

There is nothing in Bakunin’s works or in his career to back up Woodcock’s preposterous charge that Bakunin

was an apostle of destruction. As in most of his book, Woodcock’s own evidence clashes with his unwarranted conclusions.

He says that “Bakunin extolled the bloodthirstiness of peasant uprisings.” Woodcock has no quote to prove this accusation, but on the same page (15) he does quote contrary evidence from Bakunin:

“Bloody revolutions are often necessary, thanks to human stupidity; yet, they are always evil, a monstrous evil and a great disaster, not only in regard to the victims but also for the sake of the purity and perfection of the purpose in whose name they take place.”

There is now a great revival of interest in the constructive ideas of Bakunin, but Woodcock’s chapter on Bakunin does not even provide a basis for fruitful discussion. Even Marxist historians like Franz Mehring and the reactionary jurist Paul Eltzbacher [in his 1900 book *The Great Anarchists: Ideas and Teachings of Seven Major Thinkers*] gave a far better presentation of Bakunin’s ideas than Woodcock does.

Woodcock’s indictment of the Anarchist movement is drawn up as if the Anarchists could do almost anything they pleased in any situation. But they could not create the circumstances in which they had to act. Woodcock may not like peasant rebellions, violent revolutions, the General Strike or other forms of mass action. These weapons were forged not by the Anarchists, or other minorities, but by the oppressed in the heat of struggles, as were non-violent and milder measures. The Anarchists could abstain and isolate themselves from life or they could participate and try to give a libertarian direction to the protest movements. He criticises the Anarchists for using tactics they did not invent in situations they did not create.

To condemn rebels then for making mistakes is like condemning scientists because some of their experiments failed.

There can be no progress without revolt. Rejecting, as Woodcock does, almost every method of mass protest, without offering any satisfactory alternative, leads to sterility and makes impossible any kind of social advance.