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Explaining Anarchism to a Parent Can Be Tough!

Review

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a review of

Anarchy Explained to My Father by Francis Dupuis-Deri and
Thomas Deri; Translated from the French by John Gilmore.
New Star Books, Vancouver, 2017

Any set of ideas whose name defines it in terms of negativity has a lot of explaining to do when it speaks about the future. Proponents of anarchism—in plain English, “against authority”—tend to be adamantly against formulae or against determinism and quite legitimately refuse to describe the perfect, future anarchist society. Nonetheless, anarchism’s critique of oppression leads logically to a set of ideas that explicitly lay down principles for moving forward.

The biggest danger in being positive about ideas is turning them into a catechism-like book of laws, the fate of all organized religions and virtually any entity that calls itself a Party. There certainly have been tendencies towards this within anarchism, but Francis Dupuis-Deri’s conversations with his father,

Thomas Deri, have intelligently avoided engraving anarchism onto stone tablets.

Anarchy Explained to My Father, even though it sounds like paternalistic counter-paternalism, covers a broad range of political and social critiques in a collegial manner that is in itself a good example of anarchist intellectual explorations. Anarchist expressiveness—in art, song, theatre, and so on—has always enjoyed turning a thing onto its head, and in this case it’s a matter of the younger generation passing on a body of knowledge to the older generation.

Ironically, the son’s broader assimilation of a wide range of topics, such as power, human nature, metaphysics, violence, gender, family, ecology, the state, religion, capitalism, racism, and the future, gives him an authority of knowledge that reverses the conventional flow of ideas. Of course, this kind of authority has nothing to do with coercion; with knowledge comes the responsibility of the author to communicate.

There are many reasons why this book is important to anarchists, but two are especially significant. It’s a modern survey. Every generation of anarchists since Proudhon in the 1800s has produced at least one of these, but this one is truly contemporary, presenting new ideas and, as such, preventing the calcification of old ideas into orthodoxy. Also, the book spends a lot of time discussing process: the need for collaborative dialogue and decision-making.

The conversational aspect of the text gives it more life than the usual formal explications of anarchism that have accumulated over the years. But conversations also tend to be loose; in this case they’re easy to follow and the vast interconnectedness of the above-mentioned topics becomes easier to grasp, at least in a preliminary way. For the minute details, you’ll need to consult other books meant to focus more tightly on the items discussed.

This format makes it necessary, then, to move quickly over historical events and controversy. Dupuis-Deri poses “six

distinct streams of anarchist thought...anarcho-communism, anarcho-syndicalism, insurrectionary anarchism, individualist anarchism, anarcha-feminism, and anarcho-ecology,” clearly stating that he will elaborate his own interpretations of these categories. Quite reasonably, he points out that his father would possibly get very different answers from another anarchist to the same questions. Such a position helps keep the orthodox at bay and warns newcomers to anarchist thought not to get too comfortable.

He gives short shrift to the deeply controversial arguments over the activities of the Black Blocs and Antifa movements, boiling it down to an acceptance of diversity of tactics. Dupuis-Deri has written an entire book on the Black Bloc, but skirts the subject here. He spends more time on historical perceptions of violence within anarchism, but tends to stick to description, which leaves the reader needing to go elsewhere, for example, Mark Leier’s biography of Bakunin, which contains an analysis of how the effect of Nachaev’s violence on mid-19th-century anarchism had consequences still relevant whenever we confront the state’s police.

Strangely, the book contains only a brief discussion of anarcho-ecology, since confronting capitalism’s attack on the environment takes up more time for many of us than any other issue. This section, with its simplistic approach especially to primitivism as well as to anarcho-ecology’s two other sub-currents (deep ecology and libertarian municipalism), ends up as one of the weaker parts of the book.

The book would also benefit from at least a summary of the contemporary anarchist critiques of organization per se, such as in Jacques Camatte’s writings. Both father and son make many references to the need for equality within anarchist organizations, but the critique of capitalism and the state would benefit considerably from a look at the inherent tendency towards hierarchy in all organizations.

On the other hand, the book contains a surprisingly long and nuanced debate about religion and atheism. Dupuis-Deri cites numerous examples of religious anarchists and their resistance to authority as well as the statements of many anarchists that belief in a god is incompatible with free will. He's unfamiliar, it seems, with the dominant current in non-fundamentalist theology that poses free will as essential to doing good, with even Pope Francis declaring publicly that his god stands back while human beings make their own decisions on whether or not to act. If nothing else, this demonstrates the basis on which anarchists and religious activists can discuss autonomy and community.

However Dupuis-Deri's conclusion, that "faith should remain a personal matter," should not be interpreted as making belief systems off-limits for discussion and critique. Anarchists need to be wary not only of a mysticism that avoids looking at historical reality but also at strains of fundamentalist materialism, a consequence of the Enlightenment's reaction to the despotism of the European churches.

Marx and his followers enthusiastically developed this materialism into a scientific historical determinism, with the State ultimately taking over the realm of free will. Ironically, some of the most insightful critics of this process use their very anarchistic studies of ancient and modern spiritualities as counter thrusts.

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