

The Joy of Alex Comfort

A Review of Eric Laursen's *Polymath: the Life and Professions of Dr. Alex Comfort, Author of The Joy of Sex*

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Alex Comfort (1920–2000) is best remembered as the author of the bestselling *The Joy of Sex*. Not as many recall him as an anarchist and pacifist, who was also a significant poet and novelist, a medical doctor, an authority on mollusks, a founding figure in gerontology (the study of aging) as well as sexology, and a writer on humanistic views of religion. Even one of these activities would have been enough to mark a significant life. All together, they do indeed make him a “polymath,” as his biographer labels him. To Comfort himself, he regarded these “professions” as aspects of his overall process of living. They reflected his anarchist philosophy of individual responsibility and communal sharing.

To cover each of Comfort’s life-activities requires a lot of space which accounts for the size of this book. The book might have been better trimmed by an editor; for example, there is really too much about the ins and outs of British book publishing. And readers will have varying interests in Comfort’s activities. A good deal is properly taken up about Comfort’s place in British poetry, but personally it is a topic I am not concerned about. I was most interested in Comfort’s radical politics and in *The Joy of Sex* as a cultural phenomenon, as well as his personal life story. But that’s me.

Comfort called himself a pacifist. “Sometimes, however, he found that the pacifist community was more committed than he to absolute nonviolence.” (p. 148) He admired the guerrilla methods of the French resistance and of Michael Collins’ IRA. It was mass regular armies to which he objected. During World War II, he was not draftable due to a crippled hand. He was part of a campaign against Allied bombings of civilian areas. The campaign was ineffective, but some who supported the war, such as the U.S. bioregionalist Lewis Mumford, also condemned the British and U.S. civilian bombings. These culminated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

After World War II, Comfort became more active in the British anarchist movement, including writing pamphlets and books. The movement tended to be divided into two factions. One was mostly anarcho-syndicalists, who focused on union and working class organizing. Their goal was a working class revolution. The other did not deny that the class struggle remained real, but focused on apparently cross-class issues such as disarmament, civil liberties, and culture. They tended to see social conflicts as not so much between classes as between the individual and a repressive society. (These perspectives are not necessarily exclusive.) Rather than an eventual revolution, they looked toward a gradualist, reformist, series of changes. (See Price 2015.)

The slant away from the more traditional working class orientation reflected post-war conditions. While strikes and union struggles continued, overall Britain followed the U.S. into the post-war prosperity (which lasted until about 1970). Meanwhile the Soviet Union solidified into Stalinist totalitarianism. Many interpreted this as disproving the value of revolution.

The advantage of this turn was its relevance to a non-revolutionary situation. It led to exploration of issues, such as sexuality and aging, which overlapped with class but were not based in it. Nor did this have to lead to isolated individualism. The anarchists and radical pacifists became leaders of major anti-war and disarmament movements, which shook British politics. (In the U.S., radical pacifists played important roles in the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, even after most leftists had been driven out of the unions.) Comfort was one of the prominent leaders of the UK disarmament movement. With other activists, he went to jail for civil disobedience.

There were also disadvantages in this turn away from class struggle. It meant losing contact with workers when class-based mass strike waves did break out. It meant a lack of strategic power and perspective. Only the working class, due to its role in production and the economy, has the

potential power to shut down society and to start it up in a different way. Even the large nuclear disarmament demonstrations did not have the power to force a change in government policies. Rejecting revolution, they underestimated the danger that the capitalist class and its state would violently resist peaceful and democratic attempts at fundamental change.

We are in a much more crisis-ridden situation than in Comfort's time. The catastrophe of climate change (and other ecological disasters), economic stagnation, the spread of wars (with the danger of nuclear war), as well as other difficulties, are increasing even while governments are stalled and incompetent. In this period, anarchist reformism has less use.

In his personal life, Alex Comfort was fairly conventional, leaving aside his having two wives in two households for some years. The author does not think that this worked out to anyone's satisfaction. Eventually Comfort divorced wife number one and married wife number two.

His biggest success was *The Joy of Sex*, which was a runaway international bestseller. Comfort, his publisher, and the illustrators, had worked to create a book which was clearly not pornographic yet not an academic-medical tome. Artfully done, with Comfort's friendly commentary, the book struck at just the right moment. The idea of sex as a mutually cooperative and respectful pleasurable activity became widely accepted. The book was such a success that Comfort eventually came to describe it as an "albatross" around his neck; attempts to become known for his championing of issues related to aging were overwhelmed by his reputation as the "sex guru."

In later years Comfort focused most on problems of aging. While in the U.S., he collaborated with Maggie Kuhn of the "Gray Panthers," to build a movement of militant elders. Somewhat to my surprise, he is not reported to have been involved in the movement to end the U.S.-Vietnam war, either in the U.S. or Britain (although when living in the U.S. he was a resident and had to be careful in opposing the government).

In many ways Comfort reminds me of another anarchist-pacifist, as well as poet and novelist, Paul Goodman (although Goodman seems to have been one of the few influential anarchists whose path did not cross with Comfort). Goodman wrote that he had been criticized for "spread[ing] himself thin on a wide variety of subjects, on sociology and psychology, urbanism and technology, education, literature, esthetics, and ethics....It is false that I write about many subjects. I have only one, the human beings I know in their [human]-made scene." (1962; p. xiii) As this book shows, the same could be said of Alex Comfort.

References

Goodman, Paul (1962). *Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals*. NY: Random House.

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