

Review: Whither Anarchism? by Kristian Williams

Anarcho

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In 1998 Murray Bookchin wrote a response to the critics of his *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* entitled *Whither Anarchism?*. Twenty years later appears a pamphlet bearing the same name and in a way covering the same issue – the state of the movement. Only the most blinkered anarchist would disagree that this is a valid question – and one we need to address even if the rest of the revolutionary left is hardly much better and without the benefit of having a viable theory.

By Kristian Williams, who has been active in the American anarchist movement since the early 1990s and the author of *Between the Bullet and the Lie: Essays on Orwell*, this pamphlet is divided into three sections. The first, on Anarchism, is excellent. It presents a good, short, introduction on why Anarchism is an appealing theory and one which has, and will continue to, attract rebels. The second attempts to understand something many an anarchist has wondered at some stage in their political life – why, if anarchism is so good a theory, is the movement in such a state? The third is an attempt at beginning the discussion on how to bridge that gap.

I will concentrate on the second and the third parts as these are the important aspects of the pamphlet. This may, however, not be a review as such as the themes raised warrant discussion. I also admit to being perhaps at a disadvantage in being Scottish and not part of the American anarchist scene/movement – nor am I necessarily completely *au fait* with its ins-and-outs and its history. However, his comments are relevant to the British movement and my experiences within it for over three decades. I am also sure we will find similar articles and pamphlets in every decade – unlike Marxist Parties, we do not have many qualms about washing our dirty linen in public! – and I do agree with his stated aim:

“It is my hope that, despite everything, anarchism may someday transcend its present limitations and once again come to represent the highest ideals and aspirations of humanity, and that anarchists may make a distinctive contribution to the struggle for freedom and equality, and to the new world that the struggle seeks to create.”

So my comments are to be taken as a contribution to this task, hopefully will be constructive, provoke further discussion and, more importantly, action and organising. For that is the thing about washing our dirty linen publically, it gets clean rather than festering behind closed doors (the examples of the British SWP and WRP shows what happens when it does not).

Section two draws primarily on two works, Andrew Cornell's recent book *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism on the Twentieth Century* and a dissertation by Spencer Sunshine entitled "Post-1960 U.S. Anarchism and Social Theory." I have read parts of the first and am unfamiliar with the second. Cornell's book is comprehensive and well researched, although I do think he tends to exaggerate the influence of pacifism on the movement – during and after the Second World War many activists still stressed the central role of class struggle. This is the case in the UK, even after the influx of anti-war activists due to the rise of CND the class struggle anarchists remained and eventually created *Black Flag* magazine and viable, if small, federations.

It is thus an unfortunate and somewhat misleading exaggeration for Williams repeat this analysis and consequently to suggest that the "anarchist vision shrank, from the One Big Union and the General Strike, to the affinity group and the poetry reading" (23) as anarchism "became wed to pacifism during the Second World War". (38) To say this was a "turn to pacifism" (29) is exaggerated (not least because being anti-war does not equate to pacifism), although the links in many ways were a mistake as it brought in ideas quite alien to anarchism (not least the idealisation of consensus). Yet there has always been a cultural aspect to anarchism, with anarchists organising picnics, choirs, dances as well as unions, militias and debates – whether in Chicago or Barcelona. No one lives by bread alone, we just have to remember that both are required.

Likewise, the notion that prefiguration involved "counter-institutions" like "utopian communities" and "lifestyle practices" (15) was one which few anarchists accepted – in the 1930s *Vanguard* repeated the arguments raised in previous decades by Kropotkin and Malatesta on this. He is right to bemoan the tendency – which seems to have increased since the association with pacifism – of dropping out and the viewpoint that living a libertarian life is sufficient in and of itself.

Yes, "lifestyle practices" can be overblown and, unfortunately all too often, turned into the moralising Williams rightly bemoans (not to mention "prolier than thou" attitudes) – but you cannot be a good anarchist if you act in the same way you did before recognising the evils of hierarchy! The problem arises when people think that this is enough in and of itself and forget wider movements – in the UK this saw a few so-called anarchists refuse to support miners and print workers during the 1980s – and happily proclaim so in *Freedom!* – because they were, well, not enlightened like they were. They forget that they, once, were just as "unenlightened" and that people learn from struggle – how else will anarchy arrive? I am happy to report that most anarchists – with those associated with the class struggle anarchism so-often dismissed by the "new" anarchists as being irrelevant – supported such struggles and as a result *grew as a movement*.

The few who shamed the pages of *Freedom* reflected what Williams describes as "a tendency to view ourselves as outside and apart from society as a whole" (18) and this indeed produces a movement which "turns increasingly inward," (31) both of which he is right to bemoan. Sometimes it is hard not to conclude that some anarchists embrace positions designed to marginalise themselves, positions so extreme that no possible social revolution could ever make them happy never mind any popular movement. I am thinking here of the likes of the primitivists (of whom we thankfully hear less of) who, while waiting for the collapse of "Industrial society," dismiss any movement in favour of quietism (and presumably preparing to be one of its few survivors). Much the same can be said of the "insurrectionists" whose masking-up hides their ideas even more effectively from other protesters and the general public than their faces – some appeared on *The Daily Show* during the anti-Globalisation protests and completely failed to take the opportunity that afforded to express an attractive vision to the audience at home (I wonder if any of those are

still in the movement and, if so, whether they regret wasting this opportunity). This is not to say that Black Bloc tactics are not useful at times, simply that we must take care not to needlessly alienate others nor fetishise something which has worked well in specific occasions (nor forget it failed in others).

We all need to be outward looking and that in itself would help solve many of the problems Williams points to. Yet while Williams is right to bemoan the (often self-imposed) isolation of the movement, his own analysis at times seems to be isolated from the wider world. After all, Marxists could point to numerous “successes” – to the appeal of Russia was added China, Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua and, more recently, Venezuela. Likewise, activists may find it easier to join a party with an infrastructure in place rather than help build one along with a few others. So, yes, the Red Scare “all but destroyed the IWW” but “with it the movement” (14) ignores many other factors – such as the expulsion of anarchists back to their “native” countries (not least Russia, to which many immigrant libertarians also voluntarily left to join the revolution). Likewise, the anarchist movement, like the IWW, had to deal with the new Communist Party – well-funded by Moscow Gold and with an apparently successful revolution to point to. As such, Williams fails to place anarchism within the wider left and the challenges it faced. This wider context is important to explain most of American anarchism’s weaknesses after the First World War – but not all.

The decline of the wider socialist left must also be factored in. We must remember that those described today as “socialists” are simply seeking reforms within capitalism – as if capitalism with a welfare state stops being capitalism! So hardly any of “the socialists” (like Sanders or Corbyn) are actually socialists and do not envision anything more than a reformed capitalism – so even being reformist would be a step forward (i.e., seeing reforms as a step towards socialism rather than just making capitalism better). The various tiny authoritarian socialist organisations that keep to some notion of revolution seem wedded to an alternative which is worse, namely state-capitalism. To perhaps damn with faint praise, at least as far as the wider left goes anarchists remain socialists – but this context does reduce the numbers of those who already accept elements of anarchism and can be more easily convinced of the rest compared to the pre-1917 era.

In some ways Williams repeats the stereotype so popular in Marxist circles that anarchism is lacking theory and weak on the understanding of power and the State which leads many anarchists to appropriate bits-and-pieces from other theories. Sadly, yes – but again he generalises too much and so exaggerates the problem. Yet it is a problem that does exist: I attended a talk in Glasgow a few years ago on Scottish Nationalism by a member of the *Anarchist Federation* and their point of departure was Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of national liberation struggles (itself a response to the position of the Second International and Lenin’s repetition of it). As I said at the meeting, it is not like anarchists had not written extensively on this subject and been faced with national liberation struggles in places like Cuba – so why not start with those? But, then, the arguments and conclusions felt more ultra-leftist rather than libertarian, seeking to dismiss a progressive, popular movement rather than engage and influence it. But, then, I think that some in the British anarchist scene are unfortunately too influenced by ultra-leftism – at best, council communism, at worse being concerned what various Left-Communists sects think... hopefully more are becoming aware of the utter unimportance of the opinion of groups who are in such a state that they are parasitical on the tiny UK anarchist scene!

Likewise, Williams is right to note that the likes of Zerzan come from a non-anarchist position and surely Zerzan’s previous Marxism explains his position on technology – like Engels in “On

Authority,” he sees technology and liberty as being incompatible and while Zerzan and Engels may embrace and reject the opposite options, they share the same (non-anarchist) analysis. So, yes, Zerzan and certain others have “little identifiable connection to Proudhon, Kropotkin, and Bakunin, and in fact draw their key concepts from entirely different traditions,” but can the same really be said of “Bookchin, Graeber, and a number of lesser figures”? (13) Particularly if these “lesser figures” include, say, Sam Dolgoff (another anarchist – and the numerous groups he was associated with, such as the *Vanguard* group, the *Libertarian League*, etc. – whom he singularly fails to mention).

Yes, there is a tendency to be apologetic about our theoretical legacy, which is ironic as we have been proven right time-and-time again (Marxism has spent most of its time catching up). Indeed, much of what passes for Marxist analysis was first articulated by Proudhon and I am sure if we provided unattributed quotes to a Marxist by Bakunin and Marx they would agree with those by the former and dismiss the latter. But, then, we have not had the resources of more than a sixth of the world’s surface area to produce translations of the complete works of our major thinkers. That is changing, but it is still a labour-of-love more than systematic project. And we are still dependent on anarchist activists reading the writings made available in order to learn from, rather than repeat, the past.

So Williams does point to a problem but, again, I feel he exaggerates the situation. However, we can both agree on the need for anarchists to read more theory and become better acquainted with the wealth of ideas within those writings. Luckily, for all its drawbacks (not least, the amplification of cranks), the age of the internet has made such a task easier – the number of past anarchist papers, pamphlets and books on-line increases daily. However, again, I feel he exaggerates for it is more a case of what we draw upon and how we do so. For example, as well as Proudhon’s and Kropotkin’s economic analysis I also draw upon Marx, Keynes and post-Keynesian economics to inform my understanding of capitalism. If others have produced useful analysis, then why reinvent the wheel? The question is whether what is utilised can fit into an overall libertarian perspective. In terms of economic analysis, Bakunin was right to note Marx’s contribution in volume 1 of *Capital* and recognising its lack of connection to his political strategy. So, when it comes to other positions which relate far more to strategy then we should and must be wary of undermining our core ideas with alien politics.

Yes, we all need to become better acquainted with the theorists of anarchism and, I would add, its history. If we do not do that then we are, I fear, doomed to painfully relearn the lessons previous generations gained. Such an engagement has to be critical for times and conditions have changed. We cannot mechanically apply the ideas of Malatesta, Kropotkin, Bakunin, etc. in the 21st century, but we do need to *know* them as Williams suggests. Yet he makes no mention of Malatesta at all when the Italian should always be included, preferably at the top, of any list of thinkers to read: worse, after rightly denouncing the “turn to pacifism,” he suggests Godwin as someone we could derive a theoretical core from! (29) Godwin’s pre-industrial perfectionist ideology, in spite of any useful points made, would not tackle the problems Williams points to and would probably increase them.

Which points to a core problem with his account, namely discussing “anarchism” as if it were one thing. For although we are all against capitalism, we differ on many issues: not least on the nature of a free socialist system and, far more importantly, how we get to the stage where creating such a society becomes a possibility. So the first thing to recognise is the *undesirability* of viewing “anarchism” or “anarchists” as the basis of a single movement. Ultimately, this gets

us into quite a muddle – although I can understand why people may see it as useful to unite as broadly as possible due to the benefits joint activity offers. Do not get me wrong: I recognise the similarities within the many schools of genuine anarchism and have sought to remind others of this when possible. Yet this does not mean that we should organise together into a single all-embracing federation! Simply put, we need to work with those with similar views of tactics and let the others do their own thing (although, from experience, this usually amounts to just criticising those who actually organise to do something). The basis of any such agreement will need to be on *tactics*, not *ends* – the original rationale for “anarchism without adjectives” was precisely to allow people who saw the need to work within the class struggle to organise together (Voltairine de Cleyre with *Mother Earth*, Malatesta with the Spanish Collectivists). It was not a call for general all-embracing federations, rather the reverse – and to save time and resources by *not* discussing which future (probably distant) possibility is the best but rather working to bring it closer.

Williams does point to outward looking groups (24–5) and rightly notes that practice, while important, cannot answer *all* questions. However, I cannot agree that renovation will come from “a loose association of politically engaged scholars” (35–6) for part of the problem is that many people – not just anarchists – leave such discussions to others, a specialised caste. This is not to say that there have not been excellent anarchist academics – David Berry, Nunzio Pernicone, Davide Turcato instantly spring to mind – just that we should not be dependent on just a few for our theory. Unless he uses the term “scholars” in a wide sense (and I hope he does), then this would not create a healthy movement but rather one which mimics some of the worse aspects of vanguard parties with their cadres and “professional revolutionaries.” Better an anti-intellectual, outward focused movement than one whose rank-and-file are dependent on a few enlightened thinkers – although I must stress that I think we can do better than both by having a movement where *all* think and act (and I cannot help thinking that the first part of this sentence will be quoted by Marxists and scholars than the end of it, in spite of this prediction, for I have seen the shameless selective quoting by both too many times!).

Talking of which, Williams is quite right to say that we “have not excelled at engaging ideological opponents in an effort to win the war of ideas,” (19) although that again seems exaggerated when we look at, say, Murray Bookchin (at times it seemed that was all he did do!) or Sam Dolgoff (who regularly debated with the rest of the Left). Also, again to present some context, given the systematic lying by Marxists about anarchism it is understandable why anarchists would not wish to dignify them with a response, particularly as they generally repeat the same nonsense (biologists face the same dilemma with creationists). Still, I think that we do need to engage more for it strengthens our ideas and builds the movement, although I would say we need to be selective as the fool can ask more questions than the sage can answer...

So he is right to stress that “[w]hen our theories are no longer tested against reality, they cease to be testable at all; and soon, they cease to be theories”. (33) Equally, debate now can expose the flaws – indeed, hollowness – of certain positions. For example, after an exchange of letters with a few primitivists in *Freedom* the poverty of primitivism soon became apparent and they stopped contributing their column. Since then I have concentrated on more fruitful, productive and frankly more enjoyable activities – a position I sometimes think more of us should begin with as regards such tendencies (yes, I know this is contradictory but some ideas are really so weak that ignoring them may for best given limited time, resources and – most importantly – enjoyment).

Which raises an obvious question – what is to be done? We are currently a small movement and resources, time, energy and often patience is lacking. Chomsky once noted that many activists give up because their hoped for social transformation does not quickly materialise. They forget, he suggested, that social change is like chess – it takes time and strategy to reach a position when checkmate even becomes a possibility. We need to recognise this truth and act accordingly.

Where to start? This recalls Marx’s criticism of Proudhon in the *Poverty of Philosophy* that as everything is interlinked, Proudhon was an idealist for not discussing everything at the same time along with their histories. As *Capital* twenty years later proved, such a task is impossible: so he simply borrowed Proudhon’s methodology and started with one aspect of capitalism and added others logically. As we simply cannot address and oppose everything, we need to start somewhere and aim to broaden our activities as we can. Given the defeats over the neo-liberal period, we are similar to post-Commune France and Kropotkin viewed the issue then as a matter of encouraging the “spirit of revolt” and I think he is right – getting people empowered enough to directly defend their own interests would be a major step forward.

We need to start from where we are rather than where we hope to be. All too often, the perfect is the enemy of the good. Thus criticising the CIO from the outside, pointing to the IWW as the *real* Industrial Union meant missing opportunities in the 1930s as Williams indicates (15). An example is recounted by Cornell when rather than work with an existing union an anarchist group gave a list of changes the union had to implement before they would do so – and, understandably, the union declined and an opportunity was lost (but at least one of those involved later recognised the mistake, namely confusing the end point of activity with its start).

So we need to work with people and movements as they are, seeking ways of bringing them to anarchist conclusions while helping them win reforms. And this is important. I remember one posting on an anarchist site which proclaimed the defeat of the recall election of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker was a good thing because of the illusions victory would have created! That Walker was now empowered to continue his onslaught on Wisconsin workers and the opposition was demoralised and fatally weakened seemed an irrelevance. I agreed that the opposition placing all their hopes in recalling Walker was a mistake but to suggest what was obviously a defeat was “really” a victory was the worst kind of “the worse the better” stupidity.

I do take objection to Williams’ suggestion that “under neoliberalism, many anarchists have seen the necessity of fighting to defend and preserve welfare programs but lack any theoretical justification for doing so”. (27) To be fair, he is echoing comments made by others over anarchist participation in anti-austerity protests in the UK at the start of the 2010s. However, these others were commentators who were clearly unaware of what anarchism means and Williams, as shown in the first part of the pamphlet, knows better.

Despite attempts by our opponents (whether Marxists, Propertarians, etc.), anarchism has *never* been just against the State – it has always been opposed to capitalism. This means that in terms of privatisation or nationalisation, neither are particularly favoured – we should raise *socialisation* under workers’ management as an alternative. So in terms of whether we should have profiteering bosses in charge of services or state officials, that is somewhat beside the point. However, we can say, for example, that the privatisation of British Rail (as with the privatisation of public utilities, natural monopolies) has led to poorer services and the fleecing of the public and so can understand why so many wish it to be renationalised – but, we would add, under workers’ control. Similarly, “privatisation” *could* be fine *if* the companies a service was being devolved to were workers’ co-operatives or when governments bail-out companies, we should call

upon said company to be given to its workers to run. None of this is ideal but both suggestions reflect where we are now and a path towards somewhere better as these are demands which could provoke militant action (such as occupations) which can win and so encourage further actions, further reduction in the power of the State and Capital by an increase in the power of those subject to them.

Likewise with State intervention in general. While the right (and echoed by “the left” to some degree) limit State intervention to *purely* that which claims to benefit working class people, in reality State intervention primarily benefits the ruling class. This, however, goes unmentioned – indeed, it seems to be not considered State intervention at all. Why we should be supporting attempts by the few to bolster its own State aid (absolutely or relatively) should be lost on anarchists – we should simply note that we wish State intervention to be reduced *from below*, by mass action by the people, not *from above*, by politicians and bureaucrats acting under pressure from the wealthy. Similarly, making the poorest pay for a crisis caused by the wealthiest makes no sense and is inherently unjust.

Ultimately, who seriously suggests that the role of anarchists is to support the government against its subjects? Or help further impoverish the poorest sections of the working class? This is hardly the way to build a mass movement – but, then, the Propertarians have long recognised that would never happen for them so they have cosied up to the elite (and get well-paid for their shrilling on their behalf). And, as anarchists, surely, we should get to determine which reductions in State action we support rather than be expected to give *carte blanche* to the Government? Apparently not – a truly a strange way of interpreting our ideas! But what can you expect if you seem to base your notions on dictionary definitions...

Ultimately, such commentary is like suggesting that because anarchists oppose representative democracy then we should be in favour of military coups, fascism and monarchies for these, too, end electing masters... or suggesting, if the trains are nationalised, then, as anarchists, we should walk or drive (on the government owned roads). As such, Williams in right to suggest (although I would not use these precise words) that “our opposition to the state would probably need to become less total and more strategic – not so much a smashing as a dismantling, with specified pieces to be recycled or repurposed.” (27) I would add that Malatesta and others highlighted this very point long ago – thus *Anarchy’s* analysis of the State is more sophisticated than often attributed to anarchists, recognising it does (at times) intervene beyond simply enforcing minority interests (but, always, to maintain the class system). We do, in other words, have a rich theoretical foundation to build upon.

I do feel he reads back the post-1945 consensus back to the 1930s with his suggestion that “anarchists failed to take account of the ways Keynesianism was reconstituting both the economy and the state.” (15) Given that Keynes’ *General Theory* was published in 1936, the New Deal was very much a “let us action and see what happens” process in its attempts to save capitalism from itself. Which is the point, namely that as revolutionaries aiming to end capitalism, anarchists (like others on the revolutionary left) viewed it correctly – but the question was how to relate to the mass movements which it coexisted with (and at times inspired and encouraged, whether directly or indirectly). Yet this was hardly an exclusive issue with anarchists – many Marxists viewed the New Deal as a variant of fascism (namely state intervention on behalf of capital). Did the various Socialist Parties leave the 1930s in a better state than when they entered that decade?

So anarchists were not alone in having “failed to take the advantages of the opportunities presented by the New Deal,” (27) if by opportunities it is meant the mass revolts of that era.

However, we should not be blind to the problems that what could be termed “social Keynesianism” generated. Yes, unions were tolerated, even encouraged at times, but it meant when the State turned on them, they were so flabby and so surprised that they did not know how to resist. Britain saw the National Health Service (NHS) created and this frees the bulk of the population of a great many of the worries that afflict Americans (watching Michael Moore’s *Sicko* while sick brought that home) and, of course, it weakens the clout of employers as their workers do not fear losing their healthcare along with their wages if they talk back (assuming they are lucky enough to have employment-based insurance, of course). Seeking to “roll-back State” by eliminating the NHS does not feature on any British anarchist’s “to-do-list” even though we are aware of its limitations – not least, that as a nationalised health system it is the plaything of politicians. The only people who contemplate that are the far-right fringe of the Tories, a party whose idea of “rolling-back the State” involves using the State to roll-over the working class and which, whenever in power, has subjected the NHS to numerous “reorganisations” and directed our public health funding (via mandatory tendering) into the coffers of the private companies which fund the party. Which means that any proposed “Green New Deal” or state-intervention in medical care to improve upon the dire nature of the American system needs to factor in that any such scheme will become the play-thing of the next Donald Trump (look what Trump tried to do to Obamacare), which means that a libertarian socialist perspective is really essential to avoid the mistakes made in social reform in the past – namely, leaving it up to politicians and state bureaucrats to develop and run them. So social reform needs to be driven from below, not above.

The gap between here and there, between the grim reality we face (and the often soul-destroying indifference expressed by those subject to it) and the possibilities of a libertarian society are large. It can be depressing to realise youthful hopes of complete social and individual transformation need years, decades, of agitation over minor reforms (in the shape of pay rises and such like) to build up a social movement and sense of hope which makes that possible. Yet that *is* the case and rather than simply reject anarchism and embrace social-democracy we need to think of how we can apply our ideas here-and-now and in such a way as to encourage the many libertarian tendencies which exist. Needless to say, the key one is encouraging popular resistance and movements – the labour movement and other groups resisting authority, whether public or private.

This is the key, I think. Williams is right to note that freedom “must be *created*” and if we could live as anarchists under the current system we would have no need to destroy it. (16) However, prefiguration cannot be rejected as Williams seems to suggest for we do need to apply our ideas in the class struggle – his summary that prefiguration includes “the notion that our revolutionary organisations would later provide the means of coordinating and managing society” (15) does not do this necessity justice. Needless to say, any real movement will suffer its limitations, its contradictions, along with its possibilities – we need to recognise that and see prefiguration as a process which we help shape rather than an ideal we compare actual movements to.

As Williams notes, these debates on the nature and future of the movement are hardly new. The recently published volumes of Malatesta’s *Complete Works* have similar debates on organisation, reforms, etc. which we can learn from – particularly given the common sense and practicality which permeate them. We have the failures of Marxism to our advantage now (rather than just predictions), but also the disadvantages that the State has also learned from its experiences in repressing past movements and groups, as have the bosses – strangely Williams does not mention the poisonous impact of business-sponsored think-tanks and academia in the list of obstacles we

face. (37) So we face similar tasks and problems as previous anarchists which make their writings relevant – but only insofar we also recognise your situation is also unique.

This takes time, of course. We also need flexibility. We need to recognise that one-size fits all may not be the best or the wisest position to take – for example, in some circumstances organising an IWW branch may be the best approach but at other times working within an existing trade union may make more sense (while remaining a wobbly). We need to recognise that freedom of association means the freedom *not* to associate, so attempts to group together disparate elements into *one* anarchist organisation will be doomed to failure. We need to organise with those who share similar tactics and strategies to be effective. For popular organisations the issue is the opposite, insofar as we need to organise as many people as possible to be effective – hence the pressing need *not* to confuse the two. Expecting members of a union or an occupation to be or act in every way as committed anarchists will ensure its and our marginalisation but we can and should aim for it to be run by its members and use direct action and solidarity (and not bore and alienate people by, say, discussing how best to discuss). This also means working within it to keep it that way – otherwise, as with (say) the Mexican *Casa del Obrero Mundial* it becomes a victim of its own success and ends up being taken over by others (with a devastating impact on the Mexican Revolution). The price of freedom is constant vigilance.

We also need to recognise the different contributions of different people. Yes, anti-fascist activities are important but that is often only open to the young, fit and brave – and the movement needs to be wider than that. We cannot expect everyone to be a Durruti: we also need grannies, parents, everyone. Similarly, while we should encourage self-education – both as individuals and as groups – we need to remember that we are all subject to the limitations of time, energy, and interest which vary from person to person, particularly those with work and family commitments. We must also be aware of those who want to become a big fish in a small pool – and seem to aim to make the pool smaller to increase the relative size of their ego. An outward looking perspective based on this should reduce, if not eliminate, such issues along with the “perfectionism and moral purity” (31) Williams notes is a problem.

To try and sum up. Williams’ pamphlet raises important questions even if, at times, it feels somewhat exaggerated and one-sided. By concentrating on certain negative elements, the positive ones are ignored rather than pointed to as alternatives we can learn from – for there have always been sections of the movement which have done exactly as Williams urges. We need to learn from the past rather than be nostalgic for it, for nostalgia is not what it used to be. Williams’ pamphlet, with all its flaws, should help in this process and, as such, should be read and discussed. Let us hope it has a more successful legacy than Bookchin’s work of the same name.

Whither Anarchism?

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