

Review: Anarchism's greatest hits

What Is Anarchism? An Introduction edited by Donald Rooum. (Freedom Press). £1.95

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FREEDOM PRESS is an anarchist publishing house in Britain. They also hold meetings and run a shop in Angel Alley, Whitechapel, London. Books such as 'Anarchy' by Malatesta; Kropotkin's 'The State, its Historic Role'; Vernon Richards 'Lessons of the Spanish Revolution', among others have been produced by Freedom over the years.

'What Is Anarchism? An Introduction' is their latest offering. The booklet begins with a long introduction by Donald Rooum, best known for his 'Wildcat' cartoons. He writes under the headings 'What Anarchists believe', 'How Anarchists differ', 'What Anarchists do' which were lifted from Nicholas Walter's 1969 pamphlet 'About Anarchism'. Donald gives us a theoretical introduction to some anarchist basics. His writing style is very clear and the points he makes are easy to understand.

The rest of the pamphlet is given over to the Freedom Press equivalent of a K-Tel greatest hits album. Old essays resurface, this time with a new cover. Over twenty short works by the old (mainly dead) favourites; Malatesta, Kropotkin, Godwin and Woodcock, etc, writing on topics from the meaning of the word 'Anarchy' to 'Is Anarchy possible?'

The secret of reading this pamphlet is to understand where it comes from. The anarchism of Freedom Press is intellectual and almost entirely theoretical. They are not involved in the activities that most anarchists in the world take part in; trade unions, campaigns, etc.

This emphasis on theory is reflected in the pamphlet. In the introduction names of groups are not mentioned. Facts and figures are rare. In theory there is nothing wrong with theory. But unless you link your ideas up with day to day struggle it is very hard to see the relevance, if any, of those ideas. Secondly they do not further the class struggle by encouraging action which should be the whole point of getting involved in the first place.

500,000 ANARCHISTS!

Donald claims on page 20 that there could be half a million anarchists in Britain. It is interesting to see how he got this estimate. At some of the anti-nuclear marches in the late 50's and early 60's about one in forty marched behind anarchist banners. Donald claims that "it seems fair to extrapolate from this that anarchists numbered more than one in forty of all those in favour of nuclear disarmament, perhaps one per cent of the total population".

Another method is to use the numbers not voting in a general election. "There are many reasons for refusing to vote, but it seems a conservative estimate that one in seven of the refusers, or more than one per cent of the population, refuse to vote for the anarchist reason that "it only encourages them".

"If it is correct that the anarchists are between one and two per cent of the adult population, then there are about half a million of them; a small minority, but not a minuscule minority".

There is no reason to take these "estimates" seriously. Even if they were true, these "undercover" anarchists are politically useless. They are sitting on their backsides watching TV or thinking anarchist thoughts at the football match. They are certainly not agitating, educating and organising.

Homogenised Anarchists

Donald also gives a homogenous view of anarchism, “Anarchists believe this...anarchists believe that”. In fact as he says on the cover he means “I believe this...” or at most, “Freedom Press and I believe this...”

“The differences which most often causes anarchists to separate into different groups is a difference, not of political opinion, but of presentational style” Page 13

Anarchists are made out to be essentially one happy family, but squabbling over trivia. Freedom Press has one set of anarchist ideas. There are other strands of anarchism such as anarcho-syndicalism or anarcho-communism and there are clear political differences between them. That is why we are in different groups.

In fighting the Poll Tax differences between groups were clear. Freedom held a number of discussion meetings and in the end could not decide whether or not the Poll Tax was bad.

Other groups such as the Anarchist Workers Group and the Direct Action Movement got involved in anti-poll tax groups in the unions and in the community. To say that this is only a difference of presentation only trivialises the politics involved.

Perspectives awry

Any short introduction to anarchism must contain generalities but too many important facts are left out. Under “How anarchists differ” there is no mention of the anarcho-communist strand of anarchism.

The relevance of Makhno’s ‘Platform of the Libertarian Communists’ written from the experiences of anarchists in the Russian revolution is not mentioned. Nor are the ‘Friends of Durruti’ in the Spanish revolution.

The only mention to communism is “Some anarchists are communist in the strict sense, maintaining that all goods should be held in common”. Apart from being a pathetically small reference it is also wrong. Anarcho-communists do not want to hold all goods common. I do not want to share my toothbrush or razor with anyone. Likewise I have no desire to wear a communal set of underpants.

We are communists because we believe that the means of production should be controlled by the working class and not by some rich elite. It is only in this way that we can eliminate the exploitation of the working class and have the basis for an anarchist society.

The reference to anarcho-syndicalists is roughly the same length as the reference to Individualists. Anarcho-syndicalists have a long and rich history and have played by far the most significant role, going by numbers, of any strand of anarchism.

In the Spanish revolution the anarcho-syndicalist National Confederation of Workers (CNT) numbered up to two million and led the fight against Franco. The militant Industrial Workers of the World were among the first to unionise unskilled, black and low paid workers in the USA. To give them the same space as Individualists who have played a relatively insignificant role in history is to lose all sense of perspective.

What is needed

Today, for the first time ever, the two other strands of socialism, Leninism and Labourism, have been completely discredited. The only socialist current with any credibility is anarchism, which throughout its existence has contained the most advanced political ideas of the socialist movement.

Now the potential for growth in anarchist numbers and influence is very real. Anarchist groups are organising, campaigning and growing. Groups are forming throughout the old Eastern Bloc but notably in Russia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and the Ukraine. Already existing anarchist groups are growing in Ireland, France, Spain, USA, Peru, Uruguay and elsewhere.

In Britain this is not happening. All the groups appear to be shrinking, splitting or disbanding. The pamphlet is a sad reflection of this. We should be getting stimulating pamphlets, written by activists, debating, urging us into action and realistically assessing the future.

'What is Anarchism? An Introduction' rehashes and reprints articles which could have been written any time this century. It is a good read and of historical interest but nothing more. What is needed are the ideas, the organisations and the activists. Hopefully we will see a resurgence of this sort of anarchism in Britain in the near future.

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