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No Gods, No Masters: No Thanks

Bob Black

2005

No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism. Edited by Daniel Guérin. Oakland, CA & Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press and London: Kate Sharpley Library, 2005.

What is conspicuous about this book is its narrow scope: geographical, temporal, linguistic and philosophical. It was originally published, in French, in four volumes, in 1980. It begins with a bang (Max Stirner) but ends in a whimper (Federica Montseny, one of the anarchists who became a government minister during the Spanish Revolution). She is given, in 1980, an opportunity to reply to her critics of 1938.¹ Except for that,

¹ Her defense consisted of this. First: she and her fellow government anarchists were victims “of circumstances, always stronger than men’s will” and of “historical necessity” – as if somebody held guns to their heads. “A Would-Be Justification,” in *No Gods, No Masters*, 659, and “Federica Montseny Sets the Record Straight,” 671 (“compelled by circumstances to take up government portfolios”). Why have I never been compelled by circumstances to take up a government portfolio? Second: she has learned her lesson: she won’t do it again. *Ibid.*, 675. She never got the chance.

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the book ends in 1938 – implying that, so did anarchism. The final chapter is about “Anarcho-Syndicalism in Government.” Who could take seriously an anarchism whose historical climax, according to this book, is anarcho-syndicalism *in government*? AK Press often publishes books which are calculated to discredit anarchism, not to promote or explicate it. Even more often, it publishes books which are explicitly Marxist, Leninist, nationalist, racist, sexist or authoritarian.²

The authors anthologized are all deceased white continental Europeans. All, except for Montseny, are men. Even British authors are excluded. The anthology should properly have begun with William Godwin, as did George Woodcock’s history of anarchism.³ Godwin remains unsurpassed in comprehensiveness. If he has never had the influence he should have, that is in part because he has been ignored by anarcho-leftist publishers such as AK Press. Stirner, too, has not had much influence until recently.⁴ The British anarchist tradition is rich. To some extent, Kropotkin inspired it. An anthology of classical anarchism should, in 699 pages, find room for Herbert Read, Alex Comfort, George Woodcock, Colin Ward, and Nicolas Walter – or some of them. If their leftist orthodoxy is suspected, no such suspicion attaches to Vernon Richards, Albert Meltzer and Stuart Christie. The anthology is Eurocentric, even Gallocentric. Even the texts by Russians such as Bakunin and Kropotkin were written in western Europe in French or English.

² Bob Black, “Class Struggle Social Democrats, or, The Press of Business,” *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* No. 64 (Fall/Winter 2007): 26–29, available online at www.theanarchistlibrary.com.

³ *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1962), ch. 1.

⁴ But in the 1890s, anarchists searching for their forebears found, among others, Stirner. Even George Plekhanov could write: “Max Stirner has a legitimate right to the title of the father of anarchism.” Quoted in *Max Stirner: The Ego and His Own*, ed. John Carroll (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1974), 26.

Italian anarchism is also inadequately represented. Inevitably, Errico Malatesta is included, in snippets, but not by “Anarchists Have Forgotten Their Principles” (1914) and “Pro-Government Anarchists” (1916) – his critiques of pro-war, pro-government anarchists such as Kropotkin and Jean Grave.⁵ Anarchists as impeccably orthodox as Luigi Galleani, and as peccably orthodox as Renzo Novatore, do not appear. Among contemporaries, Alfredo Bonanno does not appear.

American anarchism is ignored. Josiah Warren, Henry David Thoreau, Lysander Spooner, Stephen Pearl Andrews, Jo Labadie, and Benjamin Tucker – maybe the editor never heard of them or, if he did, dismissed them as “individualists” or something.⁶ But it would not be possible, for that reason, to dismiss Voltairine de Cleyre, Albert Parsons, Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Rudolph Rocker, and Paul Goodman. Although their omission is probably also out of ignorance, Murray Bookchin and Noam Chomsky will not be missed.

There’s a clear bias – this is why AK Press is the publisher – against any who might be considered “individualist” anarchists. The concept of individualist anarchism had some content in the 19th century. Its proponents were *not* those people now called anarcho-capitalists, who did not exist then. Individualist anarchists were anti-capitalist. Benjamin Tucker called himself a no-state socialist. Jo Labadie had been union organizer, a member of the Knights of Labor, which was something of a precursor to the Industrial Workers of the World. In Europe, the so-called individualist anarchists were mostly working class, and often dedicated to violent class struggle. Emile Henry, a bomb-throwing anarchist, is accorded five pages in the anthology. Guérin could not have been ignorant of the large *French*

⁵ *Malatesta: Life & Ideas*, comp. & ed. Vernon Richards (London: Freedom Press, 1965), 243–251.

⁶ See James J. Martin, *Men Against the State: The Expositors of Individualist Anarchism in America, 1827–1908* (DeKalb, IL: The Adrian Allen Associates, 1953).

individualist anarchist literature, if he was aware of Henry. Recently a large anthology of this literature, in English translation, has been published.⁷ Even someone far less knowledgeable about French anarchism than was Guérin, namely, myself, was able to include Octave Mirbeau, “Voters’ Strike!” in an anthology I co-edited.⁸ I hoped that it would be reprinted in the English language anarchist press. It wasn’t.

I, of all people, am not calling for compulsory diversity. It may be that no Korean or African or Latin American anarchist writings have the stature of, say, the writings of Nestor Makhno or Fernand Pelloutier (who are anthologized here) — although I doubt it. Most of those materials were probably not readily unavailable to Guérin; but, I doubt that he sought them out. I’m sure that something by the Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magon might even exceed the high standards set by Nestor Makhno and Federica Montseny. But the editor could not be unaware of the anarchist writings of Leo Tolstoy, or of a book such as John Henry Mackay, *The Anarchists*.⁹ Guérin could scarcely have believed that between 1938 and 1980, no anarchists anywhere wrote anything worth anthologizing. If he did, anarchism was dead.

In addition to its poor editorial decisions, which are too numerous for further discussion, the anthology is fundamentally flawed in its very structure. Almost all its texts are brief excerpts. The book is like a tourist guidebook to an imaginary country called Anarchism. There is only space for ideas to be declaimed, not discussed. Even Bakunin, whose rhetorical excesses fit only too well into this book, is not as exclusively bombastic as he comes across as here.

⁷ *Disruptive Elements: The Extremes of French Anarchism* (Berkeley, CA: Ardent Press, 2014).

⁸ *Rants and Incendiary Tracts: Voices of Desperate Illumination, 1558 to Present*, ed. Bob Black & Adam Parfrey (New York: Amok Press & Port Townsend, WA: Loompanics Unlimited, 1989), 74–78 (Mirbeau freely translated by Hakim Bey).

than to “enrich” or “rehabilitate” capitalism or fascism.¹⁹ Anarchists, if they understand anarchism (some do not), reject socialism and capitalism. First and foremost, they reject the state. You have to get that right *first*. Working out some of the implications, can be difficult. But some of it is easy.²⁰

It may be impossible to do justice to anarchism in an anthology, but you could hardly do worse than here. The only way to do that, would be to publish an anthology under a title such as *The Anarchists* where most of the contributors are not anarchists, and some of them, such as Joseph Conrad, are writing to refute or caricature anarchism. This book exists.¹⁰ Unfortunately, so does *No Gods, No Masters*. The conception and execution of this anthology involved a considerable measure of ignorance and ineptitude. In fact, the editor seems to say that it was compiled in haste, as a “reshuffled text,” a salvage job.¹¹ I have reason to suspect that some of the translations are poor, but, I won’t go into that now.

Guérin, like too many currently prominent anarchists, has a checkered (Cheka?) past – he is a former Stalinist. I’m not questioning the sincerity of his eventual espousal of anarchism. However, Murray Bookchin sincerely espoused anarchism – for awhile – and Noam Chomsky sincerely espouses anarchism,¹² but they were mistaken. A pure heart is no substitute for an empty head. The fundamental flaw is the anthology’s overt leftist ideological agenda, as stated by Guérin, ingenuously, himself. He thinks, condescendingly, that he is “re-opening the case for examination” – that is, the Marxist case against anarchism, which, after a show trial, found the anarchists guilty on all counts: “For in fact it seems

¹⁰ *The Anarchists*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (New York: Dell Books, 1964). But the book has an excellent introduction.

¹¹ “Foreword,” *No Gods, No Masters*, 1.

¹² Bob Black, *Anarchy after Leftism* (Columbia, MO: C.A.L. Press, 1997), ch. 10 & *passim* (Bookchin); Bob Black, “Chomsky on the Nod,” *Defacing the Currency: Selected Writings, 1992–2012* (Berkeley, CA: LBC Books, 2012), 61–172. I am not alone in doubting Chomsky’s anarchism. George Woodcock, “Noam Chomsky’s Anarchism” *Anarchism and Anarchists* (Kingston, Ontario, Canada: Quarry Press, 1992), 224–28; John Zerzan, “Who Is Chomsky?” *Running on Emptiness: The Pathology of Civilization* (Los Angeles, CA: Feral House, 2002), 140–43. Bookchin renounced anarchism. Chomsky should do that too.

¹⁹ Black, “Chomsky on the Nod,” 130–31.

²⁰ Bob Black, “Feminism as Fascism,” *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays* (Port Townsend, WA: Loompanics Unlimited, n.d. [1987]), 133.

that anarchy's constructive ideas are alive and well and that they can, provided they are re-examined and held up to critical scrutiny, help contemporary socialist thinking to strike out in new directions."¹³

This was exactly what Guérin said previously, in his book *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*, as summarized by the stupidest of all current anarchist geniuses, Noam Chomsky:

Daniel Guérin has undertaken what he has called a "process of rehabilitation" of Marxism. He argues, convincingly I believe, that "the constructive ideas of anarchism retain their validity, that they may, when re-examined and sifted, assist contemporary socialist thought, to undertake a new departure ... and contribute to enriching Marxism." ... This is natural and proper.¹⁴

In other words, for Guérin, as for Chomsky, the only value of anarchism is to rehabilitate or enrich socialism or Marxism. That anarchism might be an *alternative* to socialism, Marxism, leftism, liberalism, etc., never occurred to either of them. Socialism is the entrée; anarchism is just a condiment. Changing metaphors: anarchism is the makeup for socialism with a human face. We have AK Press, and its spinoff, PM Press, and doctrinaire punk leftist periodicals like *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll*, etc., to thank for ruining anarchism's historical opportunity, after the demise of European Communism, to liquidate (as the Marxists might say) Marxism in theory as in practice. We might have come forward as what we have always been, the only real revolutionaries. Some of us attempted that.

¹³ "Foreword," 3.

¹⁴ Noam Chomsky, *Chomsky on Anarchism*, ed. Barry Pateman (Edinburgh, Scotland & Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2005), 128, quoted in "Chomsky on the Nod," 130. Chomsky, who is published mainly by AK Press these days, provided a back cover blurb for the Guérin anthology.

Norwithstanding his solicitude for Max Stirner,¹⁵ this is true: "Guérin, an ex-Marxist, understands anarchism – as does Chomsky – in the most Marxist possible way, considering that these theories are irreconcilable."¹⁶ George Woodcock also believed that Guérin and Chomsky were left Marxists who were cherry-picking anarchism for "those elements which may serve to diminish the contradictions in Marx's doctrines."¹⁷

If there is reason to believe that Guérin was not well-informed about anarchism – there is – there is also reason to suspect that he was not very bright. The Situationists contemptuously referred to him as "one of our famous intellectuals, and a libertarian at that." His pamphlet on Algeria (1965) reveals Guérin to have had a fatuous faith in the revolutionary virtue of the deposed nationalist dictator, Ben Bella, whom he found to be charismatic: "Whether they are partisans of the self-managing masses or of police-state bureaucracies, the 'leftist intellectuals' of the period from which we are just emerging [wishful thinking] always have the same awestruck admiration for power and government."¹⁸

A really good anarchist anthology might be difficult to assemble. I know that there have been other anarchist anthologies. I have read several, which I am not now evaluating. But if it is difficult to assemble a really good anarchist anthology, that is no excuse for assembling a really bad anarchist anthology. The Hippocratic Oath begins: "First, do no harm." Anarchism has no more reason to "enrich" or to "rehabilitate" socialism

¹⁵ Daniel Guérin, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 27–33; see Black, "Chomsky on the Nod," 76–77 & nn. 35–36.

¹⁶ Black, "Chomsky on the Nod," 76–77.

¹⁷ Woodcock, "Chomsky's Anarchism," 228, quoted in Black, "Chomsky on the Nod," 77 n. 36, and in Ruth Kinna, *Anarchism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2005).

¹⁸ "The Algeria of Daniel Guérin, Libertarian," *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. & trans. Ken Knabb (rev. & exp. ed.; Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 236–37.