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No Match For Me

Bob Black

2002

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You have to suspect you're dealing with an editor with a major attitude problem when he is already berating his readers in providing subscription information. Editor/publisher Fred Woodworth warns: "PLEASE NOTE — subscription means you will get four issues for ten dollars; it does not entitle you to harass me or give me orders." Caveat emptor! The customer is always wrong. Moreover, "Assholes, imbeciles, and superpatriots" are warned not to send in their screechings and threats, he will discard them, unread, "I will, however, keep your name on file in case anything happens to me, so think about that." Later in the issue, Woodworth denounces a police snitch, presumably for not taking his revenge, as Woodworth threatens to do, posthumously. Why wait?

The reader who has made it past the prefatory bluster will be surprised, unless forewarned, that *The Match!* is an *anarchist* publication. Anarchism calls for a society based on voluntary cooperation instead of state-imposed order. While it does not assume

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(as George Bernard Shaw falsely accused Kropotkin of supposing), selfless generalized lovingkindness, it does usually posit some capacity for fellow-feeling and mutual aid, apparent even in class society, and potentially susceptible to enlargement in more favorable social circumstances.

There's no trace of these minimal but foundational anarchist principles in *The Match!* There's little more than tabloid-level sniping and griping about miscellaneous police abuses, the War on Drugs, and how bureaucracy inconveniences small businessmen like Fred Woodworth. The state is demonized but not analysed. How this engine of pure evil could have triumphed worldwide, despite 91 issues of *The Match!* demanding its abolition, Woodworth does not explain. It has not occurred to him that the state might be integral to, not just parasitic upon, certain forms of society, economy and even technology. Just throw the rascals out and "any freely chosen stateless system could work, alone or in combination with others — anarcho-communist, anarcho-capitalist, or anarcho-hermit." As a social theory this has all the persuasiveness of "consider the lilies, they toil not, neither do they spin" as an argument for the abolition of work. It so happens there are better arguments for the abolition of the state, as for the abolition of work, but they acknowledge and contest, rather than ignore, the social sources of political domination.

In fact, a socioeconomically agnostic anarchism is not only absurd, it is impossible. Woodworth's pure-and-simple anarchism has definite social suppositions. His utopia is — and I use the word precisely and descriptively, not pejoratively — petit-bourgeois. He espouses free trade and opines that "people, I think, are always going to be buying and selling things." But "there is a fundamental difference in kind, between small business" — like Woodworth's print shop — "and large or corporative [sic] business." What might that difference be? He doesn't say. Presumably small business is better because he owns one. "I myself see nothing objectionable," he adds, "and much that is desirable, in a world where small businesses flour-

to do something illegal. Under Federal law and the laws of a minority of states, it also requires some "overt act" in the furtherance of the conspiracy, but it never requires that the crime be carried out. Even in this narrow legal sense, conspiracies aren't uncommon — big business and organized crime enter into them frequently — although problems of proof make prosecutions infrequent. It is entirely appropriate, I think, for anarchists and political activists in general to broaden the sense of the word somewhat — to use it as a metaphor — to refer to any (usually secret) agreement which, if or when carried out, would or does accomplish some harm. This is a legitimate, limited metaphorical extension of the technical meaning, justified by the important common features (agreement and harm) the wider and narrower definitions share. In this sense, what Woodworth thinks the post office is doing to him qualifies as a conspiracy. In his case the difficulty is that there is no evidence whatever that the postal bureaucrats conspired to trouble him. He has, in fact, opened up a post office box at another station. What invites ridicule and dismissal is implausible and unsubstantiated paranoid effusions, especially when accompanied — as these are — with a fund-raising appeal. Conspiracy accusations are cheapened by reflexive overuse. We need to save them for occasions when they are important and, especially, for occasions where they might be true.

Woodworth's hobby-horse *The Match!* is badly termite-ridden. Eccentricity loses its charm when married to malice and divorced from irony and wit. In all probability Woodworth has no idea how dishonest he is. Like a sociopath, he would likely pass a lie detector test no matter what he might say. Which only goes to show that sincerity is just not enough, not nearly enough. There's needed also a certain measure of intelligence, receptivity and empathy. It is possible to be critical without being callous, to forgive but not forget, and to admit on occasion, however regretfully, that you don't have all the answers. If you think you have all the answers, you probably don't have any of them.

Thus the coils of conspiracy tighten around liberty's lonely paladin. A government which (as Woodworth has previously revealed) has plotted and perpetrated such diabolical schemes as unleaded gas, ISBN numbers and universal product codes is capable of any enormity. That it took the state 25 years to think up a devious way to hassle *The Match!* just goes to show how incompetent it is. No matter what happens, Woodworth can work it into his delusional system. No possible turn of events cannot be given a conspiratorial spin. Woodworth is not alone in the self-confirming circularity of his anarchism; the tendency, or temptation, influences much — too much — anarchist expression. But he takes it to its mad-logical, solipsistic extreme, to ideas of reference, to assuming that he is as important to the state as the state is to him. His only utility to anarchists is as a cautionary example.

Which does not resolve the problem so pathologically dramatized by the Woodworth case. It follows just from being one that an anarchist should regard state policies and actions with distrust. But that is not to say that malign designs should be automatically imputed to this or that state action. A lot of it is just the bureaucracy making work for itself or repeating itself from force of habit. Most anarchists, like most other people, are simply not important to the state. Routine arrangements suffice to control almost everyone within acceptable limits. The system of rules is far more significant than its specific content. It is more important *that* we obey than *what* we obey. The particular abuses that Woodworth fumes about, the drug laws, police excesses, licensing and regulation — they might all be corrected (although they won't be) without seriously changing, much less overthrowing, state society. Hating the system is not enough; we have to understand it too. That entails distinguishing its essentials from its incidentals.

On the other hand, the notion of conspiracy has to be rescued from statist detractors and anarchist idiots. The word does mean something after all, and what it designates really does happen. In law, a conspiracy is simply an agreement by two or more persons

ished" — as if you could have such a world in which big businesses did not also flourish.

Unhyphenated anarchism is hyphenated after all. It posits the market, money, and private property in the means of production. It follows, as Woodworth confirms, that theft is reprehensible. In exchanges with letter-writers, he denounces the shoplifting of overpriced books from a chain bookstore and Kinko's employees running off copies of their zines at company expense. Only on the verge of starvation, he says, is stealing even *food* justifiable, and even then (he admonishes) "AT LEAST regard it as a regrettable necessity, not something that you glorify." Even capitalist law excuses theft in cases of serious immediate necessity, so this is not much of a concession from an anarchist. He refuses to countenance the time-honored anarchist understanding of Proudhon's slogan "Property is theft" as justifying the stealing back, by workers and consumers, of some small part of the wealth which the bosses and owners have stolen from them.

Nor does that exhaust the extent of Woodworth's commitment to capitalism. It might be supposed that the "fundamental difference in kind" he averred between big business and small business is the difference between wage-labor and self-employment. That the distinction is in a broad perspective untenable is not, for present purposes, relevant, for Woodworth rejects it. As between employer and employee, bourgeois and proletarian, Woodworth sides with the boss. His crushing response to the defender of the Kinko's ripoff is: "Would YOU hire J-G- to work for YOU??" So wage-labor is okay. The letter writer really infuriates Fred the Great when he adds: "Has your long self-employment helped you to forget that wage-slavery is not a buzzword, but a reality that becomes more and more apparent as one studies the slavery of earlier times?" A fair question, the kind that enrages Woodworth: "Your facile comparison of two snot-nosed kids in a big city filching everything they can get their hands on, to actual SLAVES in the old American South and elsewhere, is fairly sickening."

For an anarchist Imam, Woodworth is remarkably obtuse, or at least he pretends to be. You might think that “wage-slavery” is the recent hyperbole of some historically ignorant snot-nosed kid. Actually it is standard anarchist and socialist rhetoric since the nineteenth century, Kropotkin, Berkman, Karl Marx, William Morris, everybody. Nineteenth-century radicals were well aware of chattel slavery and, until it was ended, they were its tireless opponents on both sides of the Atlantic. But they were also aware of parallels between chattel slavery and the wage-slavery of wage-laborers, indeed, the material conditions at the time were not that disparate. There’s no indication in his rag that Woodworth knows anything about chattel slavery *or* wage-slavery. The latter expression is, to be sure, a metaphor. But a metaphor is not a lie, it is an attempt to enlarge understanding by expanding a known meaning or image to an unknown, or less known one. It doesn’t always work, but it’s a major means of extending knowledge if only provisionally. A lot of our vocabulary consists of metaphors so thoroughly digested that only the experts remember what they started out as. Unlike Woodworth’s ideology, language grows and even improves.

Indeed it has always been a puzzle where Woodworth’s lying leaves off and his stupidity begins. As to any question there are only two answers: his answer and the wrong answer. If he has ever been wrong about anything, even once, he’s never admitted it — an extraordinary achievement in 27 years of publishing interrupted only by several stretches of obscure, uh, personal difficulties. The Woodworth Way is to come to a snap judgment and edit out any after-arriving information to the contrary. From *Processed World* in 1984 to Jim Hogshire today, he’s defended admitted police snitches against retaliatory police snitching. He has to be the only pundit in America who considers the so-called Unabomber a “random killer.” Presumably it was just a coincidence that the avowedly anti-technological Unabomber targeted a lumber industry lobbyist, the president of United Airlines, the owner of a computer store, a genetic engineer, etc. You can say anything about or against this

campaign that you like, but “random” it is not. Not even the U.S. government is that foolish.

As only his readers (and a few high-level, “need to know” government operatives) appreciate, Fred Woodworth is far and away the most prominent and dangerous enemy of the state. On no other assumption is his singular persecution explicable. The Federal Government (as he explains) through the post office has delivered “a one-two punch that damn near knocked *The Match* right out of the ring.” First the Feds promulgated new bulk-mailing rules too difficult for Woodworth to understand, although — one year later — I have yet to hear of any other anarchist, radical, or political publisher, or for that matter any publisher, who has had any trouble parrying this first punch.

“The second blow” was the announced closing of the branch post office where *The Match!* has received mail for 25 years. The reader is at this point thinking, “Oh, no, he’s going to insinuate that crazy old Woodworth thinks the closing’s aimed at *him*. Black’s going too far this time.” Thus spake Woodworth:

There’s no doubt in my mind [*there never is*] that this bogus shutdown was a deliberate tactic intended to have two consequences: first, *The Match...* would be destabilized and deprived of a large part of the value of longevity and stability at a single address [“residing in literally millions of old issues of such magazines as *Penthouse*, *Hustler*,” etc.] Secondly, some statist flunky could then descend on our old address, divert plenty of mail, and send another asset — credibility — into the toilet.

Until now it was a mystery to me why people hang on to their old issues of stroke magazines. It’s so they can read the ads again and again! But I still can’t figure out why so many pages are cluttered up by all those photographs.