

Anarchy and Ecstasy

A review of *Anarchy & Ecstasy: Visions of Halcyon Days* by John Moore

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Nineteenth century rationalist/materialist/atheist anarchists were wont to assert that “Anarchy is not chaos.” In recent years, a reevaluation of the word chaos has been undertaken by a number of anarchist writers (the undersigned included) in the light of both “mythohistory” and science. Both fields now view chaos as more than merely violent disorder or entropy.

Classical physics and mechanics, like classical political theory (including socialism and anarchism), were based on a masked ideology of work and the “clockwork” universe. A machine which went haywire or ran down was a bad machine. Chaos is bad in these classical paradigms. In the new paradigms, however, chaos can appear as good—synonymous with such affirmative-sounding concepts as Prigogine’s “creative evolution.”

Meanwhile, and simultaneously, mythohistory has uncovered the positive image of chaos in certain cultural complexes which might be called pre-Classical (or even pre-Historical). Thus, the very new and the very old coincide to offer us what can now be seen as an anti-Classical or anti-mechanistic view of chaos. For an anarchist to use a word like chaos in a positive sense no longer implies a sort of Nechaevian nihilism. Case in point (as Rod Serling used to say): John Moore’s pamphlet *Anarchy & Ecstasy: Visions of Halcyon Days*.

Moore appears not to have read any of the American “chaos” school of anarchism (such as Discordian Zen, anarchy-Taoism, “Ontological Anarchy,” etc.). Nor does he refer to any works in chaos science. He seems to have “made his own system” (as Blake advises) in relative isolation, utilizing an idiosyncratic mix of readings, which in some ways mirrors the American synthesis (as in his absorption of Situationist “pleasure-politics”) but in other ways diverges from it.

Image of Paradise

Moore’s brilliant analysis of the figure of Chaos in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, for example, gives his work a distinctive British flavor, as does his evocation of Avalon (the apple garden) as an image of paradise worth regaining. But Moore certainly does read American books—including F. Perlman, K. Rexroth, Margot Adler and Starhawk. His reliance on the latter pair of authors reveals an interest in “neo-paganism” which will no doubt annoy certain anarchists, despite his claim to oppose “religion” (and “God”) with “spirituality” (and “the Goddess”). I admit to some problems with this aspect of Moore’s work, and will return to the question again.

Moore is at his best in the presentation of what I call “poetic facts.” For example, he investigates the etymology of the words wild and wilderness, connecting them with will (to be wild is to be self-willed) and bewilderment (to wander in a trackless forest; also “amazement”). From all this he creates a portmanteau-word, be wilderness, which he offers as a description or slogan of his project, his “brand” of anarchy. This is a ploy worthy of a poet.

In games like this Moore achieves his best writing and clearest thinking. When he relies on solid facts (such as dictionaries contain) and his own imagination, he makes real donations to anarchist literature (in fact I intend to appropriate the term be wilderness for my own purposes immediately).

An Order of New Age

In dealing directly with a text such as Milton or the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Moore shines. However, when he relies on secondary material (the theories of other theorists) his insights be-

come less convincing, less luminous. The extensive quotations from Starhawk are permeated with an odor of New-Age, and the semantic vagueness of the whole feel-good school of neo-shamanism. Moore also makes excessive use of an author named Henry Bailey Stevens (*The Recovery of Culture*, 1949), whom I have not read, but whose theories appear to me questionable, to put it mildly.

Forgetting his implication that the earliest human society must have been (like Chaos itself) without “gender,” Moore uses Starhawk to assert the primordality of matriarchy. My own position on this vexing question is polemical: I oppose the idea of primordial matriarchy because I oppose the idea of any primordial “-archy.” The “Rule of Mom” may in some ways be preferable to the “Rule of Dad” (or then again it might not)—still I prefer to vote for Nobody (an-archy, “No Rule”) rather than for the lesser of two evils.

As for H.B. Stevens, he supposes that the original society was not only matriarchal but exclusively agricultural, or rather (to be precise) fruitarian-vegetarian, based on an economy of orchards or groves. Admittedly this is not labor-intensive agriculture aimed at the production of surplus—rather an agriculture “before the fact,” before the “Agricultural Revolution” of the Neolithic. The Fall from Stevens’ paradise was precipitated by the Ice Age and its naturally-imposed scarcity, which led to the evil innovations of hunting and then animal husbandry.

The meat-eaters (referred to as “barbarians”) then overcame the fruitarian Southerners, thus introducing oppression into human society. In the Stevenian ethos, Cain the agriculturist was quite right to murder Abel, the herdsman, in defense of genuine paradisaic economy and freedom from “private property.” This reversal of biblical values suggests the influence of Gnostic Dualism, and indeed Stevens creates a strict dichotomy in which “good” represents tree/fruit/ gathering/ female/South and “evil” becomes ice/blood/hunting/male/North.

A fascinating thesis—but unfortunately for its supporters no “arboricultural” tribes have survived to be studied by anthropologists, nor can any trace of such economies be uncovered by ethnohistorical means. Structurally speaking, the “earliest” societies we can observe are hunter/gatherer societies which practise no agriculture, not even the cultivation of orchards.

Moreover, the concept of non-authoritarian societies (as developed by Sahlins, Clastres and others) depends for its illustrative material on hunter/ gatherer economies. “War,” according to this school, does not develop out of hunting but out of agricultural economy with its dialectic of scarcity and surplus.

Hunter/gatherers possess non-hierarchic organization and are frequently more gender-egalitarian than agricultural societies. Etc., etc. A great deal of writing on these subjects has appeared since 1949. None of it should prevent Moore from admiring the poetic vividness of Stevens’ theory—but some of it might lead him to doubt the factual basis of Stevens’ claims.

There may exist medical or political reasons for frutarianism—or veganism but Moore appears to imply the existence of moral reasons, a stance strangely out of harmony with his promise to adopt an “antinomian” position. If he were to argue that such-&-such a behavior is “natural” (rather than “moral”)—and therefore somehow a categorical imperative of sorts—might I not then reply (as many have done) that it is “natural” to obey authority, or at least to accept on authority that the behavior in question is “natural”?

I see no way out of this dilemma—and thus I cannot help feeling that the inhabitant of the Bewilderness would do well to avoid all concepts of “natural” rights and wrongs (including the “naturalness” of hunter/gatherer societies and even of anarchy itself). The chaote is free to imagine—to imagine Nature as Desire or Desire as Nature.

If the chaote desires such-&-such a behavior, then let it be proclaimed by the Sovereign Imagination that the behavior is “natural” for that chaote—not as an inalienable right, but as an act of will. And if anyone should ask what then prevents the outbreak of violent disorder and the spread of entropy, we may refer them to Moore’s own analysis of chaos as a positive force of liberation, situated beyond the false and oppressive dichotomy of cosmic good and evil.

Moore makes fun (and rightly, I believe) of the usual pallid anarchist version of a future free society, in which everything human seems to have disappeared except the politics of consensus. In its stead he offers a vision, centered on a mystery of wildness, wilderness and chaos, based on a personal reading of myth and history but also involving practical and experiential inspirations for action in the here-and-now.

As such, as vision, I find *Anarchy & Ecstasy* an “attractive” work (in the sense C. Fourier used the word, to mean lovable and sexy). There are pages, however, where Moore seems to take his vision for revelation, something beyond the personal, something absolute—and here I begin to tune out.

But as pure rant, the book overcomes its own limitations—and for its “delirious rhetoric” it deserves a proud place on the shelf labeled “Chaos.”

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