

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Review of "Means and Ends" by Zoe Baker

Jay Fraser

October 4th, 2023

Anarchist historiography has always been in a particularly tense situation. Whether to write a history of anarchism as a historian in the modern academic mode – a mode characterised by attempts at dry abstraction from ideology, doomed to fail – or in an openly ideological fashion? *Means and Ends*, the new text by Zoe Baker, suggests a puissant approach: write the history according to the facts, and allow them to justify themselves ideologically, acknowledging one's own position beforehand.

Baker, perhaps known better to users of the internet by her long-time YouTube nom de plume 'anarchopac', has taken her first steps into mainstream publication with *Means and Ends*, an adaptation of a doctoral thesis on the history of anarchism as it evolved and presented itself within what might very loosely be called the West, from the 19th century onwards. Baker's stated aim for the text is to outline in relatively detailed strokes the origins of formal anarchism in these regions and then trace from the ideological and material positions the

Jay Fraser
Review of "Means and Ends" by Zoe Baker
October 4th, 2023

Retrieved on February 9th, 2024 from
<https://organisemagazine.org.uk/2023/10/04/means-and-ends-review/>

theanarchistlibrary.org

strategic beliefs that anarchisms did – and in many cases continue to – hold.

Great care has clearly been taken by both Baker and editors to revise the doctoral content into an accessible work; the title of this review is a testament to that success. Beginning with a strongly structured introductory chapter, the clarity and precision of the prose throughout the book is standout. Much as the balance between ideology and academy can introduce tensions in histories of this sort, so too can the balance between specialist terminology and the desire for the wider audience; Baker has found this balance excellently. Terminology specific to radical positions and thinkers is introduced only when necessary and explained well, allowing even readers who are fairly inexperienced in dealing with the infamously sinuous prose of radicals to parse it easily.

The attempted historic distance also works in favour of the text. While it reveals the formal academic origins of the project – a project for which Baker tells the reader that debating whether or not anarchist theory is ‘correct’ is not the goal – it nevertheless allows the concepts and internal logic of the positions historical anarchist thinkers held to be presented on their own merits; merits which, to the surprise of very few reading *Organise!*, are often convincing without the need for polemical window dressing.

Another area in which the academic origin of the text is clear is the rigour of the scholarship; while I have no way of knowing this strictly, I would expect that Baker’s doctoral thesis was an extremely successful submission, as the quality of the argumentation and citation given in the published version of the text is undeniable. The breadth of citation presented and the command over the utilised sources is enviable for any scholar, and despite this *Means and Ends* largely evades the tendency of heavily sourced work to become entangled in the minutiae of argumentation and dates, in favour of the aforementioned clarity that Baker’s writing clearly possesses.

These minor critiques aside, the content of *Means and Ends* is as robust as its research and the argumentation is as clear as the general prose styling. While a book tackling such a tendentious topic at such length will always provide the opportunity for one group or another to take umbrage, the quality of Zoe Baker's debut work is fundamentally inescapable, and there is very little doubt that *Means and Ends* will join my shortlist of must-read histories of anarchism and the anarchist movement, taking pride of place alongside such well regarded classics as Peter Marshall's *Demanding the Impossible*. For any individual interested in the roots of the movement and how the material circumstances of those roots impacted the development of ideas and strategy, this text will more than satisfy.

Perhaps impossible to know, I would speculate that years producing digital content for the oft-uncharitable YouTube audience has honed Zoe Baker's sense of precision to an obsidian edge.

This precision and honesty leads to both the previously mentioned scholarship and clarity, but also to some moments of fairly impressive understatement; within the introduction, Baker references her own linguistic limitations as something that will prevent her from giving a thorough presentation of anarchist theory from all places, at all times; surely an admirable thing to mention, so avoid presenting a false impression to readers. This does not, however, prevent Baker from demonstrating a familiarity with a vast array of sources – within the first thirty pages alone, we have mentions and references to classic European stalwarts such as Kropotkin and Proudhon, as well as names that are frankly altogether unheard of to most anglophone readers; Kubo Yuzuru, Li Yaotang, and Anselme Bellegarrigue to name but a few. The irony of seeing these names alongside an apology for the limitations of the author's referencing is one of several moments of levity throughout the text.

Thus far, this review has been limited in its scope to an overview of the qualities of *Means and Ends* as a text being read; how is it presented, how grounded are its claims, what is the style, et cetera; until this point, nothing has been said in detail about the quality of the contents. The reason for this is simple; from the perspective of the anarchist reader, very little Baker says is shocking – it is, to quote from everyone's favourite not-actually-an-anarchist Noam Chomsky, 'uncontroversial' in nature. This is to be expected from a text that seeks to outline the roots of ideas in their material history for the wider public; many well read anarchists will already have a grasp on some of this material and the presentation is truly what makes this text stand out.

However, it would be remiss of a reviewer to simply leave the contents to themselves entirely; therefore, there are two major elements of Baker's text worth discussion from the perspective of an anarchist being read by other (probable) anarchists; firstly, her definition of anarchism in general.

Undoubtedly, anarchism as a political movement has several ideas attached to it in the general consciousness that aren't unique to any specific strain, but tendencies exist in vast numbers and the differences, while sometimes obscure, are often significant; Baker opts for a definition that is rooted very broadly in the common soil of leftist struggle – an anti-state form of revolutionary socialism, arising in Europe in the mid-19th Century in concert with the First International. Baker, therefore, has no time for proto-anarchists such as William Godwin, maybe-anarchists such as Proudhon, or the individualist anarchists which rise to prominence in the later 19th Century. Baker is careful to note that this is a practical decision, rather than being a 'claim to establish the one true version of anarchism' (44), and it is very true that care is taken throughout the text to avoid prescriptivism, but it is nevertheless one area in which *Means and Ends* is limited in scope. Of course, limitations in scope exist in all historical works as any truly universal text would be beyond the work of a lifetime, but given the current resurgence in popularity of individualist and insurrectionary anarchisms there is a mild conflict between the topic covered and Baker's stated intent to provide a means through which contemporary anarchists can 'learn valuable lessons and develop new ideas'¹.

Secondly, continuing from the mention of insurrectionary anarchism, *Means and Ends* does in fact contain discussion of this very tendency: Chapter Six is dedicated to it, in fact. It

¹ Bonanno, Alfredo, trans. Weir, Jean, 'A Critique of Syndicalist Methods', available online at: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/alfredo-bonanno-a-critique-of-syndicalist-methods#toc9>

is somewhat disappointing, then, to see the ultimate conclusion of the chapter seemingly so contrary to the generally neutral approach taken elsewhere in the text; the final paragraph opening with the claim that 'it is fair to say that insurrectionist anarchism was unsuccessful' insofar as the stated aims of its proponents, and imploring the reader to 'understand insurrectionist anarchists on their own terms' (210). While inarguable that insurrectionary means did not lead to an anarchist world, it is somewhat surprising to see a text committed to providing opportunities for lessons so utterly direct in its conclusion on a particular strand; not least when a later chapter devoted to syndicalism – a strain of thought that many, including figures such as Bonanno, believe to be ultimately inimical to the fundamental goals of the anti-state movement. After all, Bonanno tells us, 'it is impossible for anarchist comrades to join the government; but it happens' – it is odd, then, to compare the blunt dismissal of insurrectionists with the altogether more measured evaluation of the many failures of the syndicalist movements, which spans three paragraphs and contains quotations from those unions themselves explaining their reactions to failure, and a brief summary of moments in which syndicalism might be said to have been successful in some measure after all.

Ultimately, though these critiques may seem extreme, I do not believe they are so consequential; there are concerns with this text, but these concerns may come from myself just as much as they do Baker – I am, I must confess, extremely sceptical of the syndicalist tradition myself and fond of the insurrectionary. It is altogether probably that if I were to write a history of the two, another could levy the same critique at me in reverse. It is, however, worth noting given the number of anarchists today who take influence from the insurrectionary elements and the relative contemporary weakness of the syndicalist movement, given Baker's express intent to provide the opportunity for lessons in the modern moment.