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Introduction to *The Best of Social Anarchism*

Jeff Shantz

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To achieve any real lasting success, movements for social change require infrastructures of resistance, processes and institutions that provide a sustaining framework for creating and maintaining the struggle. Indeed, in the absence of such support, even lively and enthusiastic mobilizations can dissipate very quickly without much impact, as the Occupy encampments of 2011 vividly illustrate. Through common struggle and the pressing realities of meeting material, cultural, and social needs and desires, communities develop such infrastructures to sustain themselves and to provide the support necessary for ongoing struggles and the inspiration of the new world they seek to make. Infrastructures of resistance include a variety of institutions, organizations and practices, such as alternative media and publishing, shared spaces like social centers, bookstores, union halls and bars, workers campgrounds and medical clinics.

The building, maintenance, and nurturing of such infrastructures is a key part of social anarchist practice. For social anarchists, thoroughgoing social change — including what might

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be called revolutionary change — toward anarchist social relations involves the constant extension of spheres of mutual aid and solidarity until they make up the bulk of human social activities and relationships. These are processes of rendering the state obsolete — an obvious anachronism for all to see. At the same time, the community-based infrastructures of resistance provide bases of social defense against forces of reaction.

Part of this social transformation is imaginal or ideational — it involves advances in the struggles over ideas. In the words of *Social Anarchism*'s dedicated editor Howard Ehrlich, it requires the development of “anarchist transfer cultures,” the perspectives and practices by which we sustain the move beyond state capitalism to anarchist social relations, building them as we go. Ehrlich describes anarchist transfer cultures in these terms:

“A transfer culture is that agglomeration of ideas and practices that guide people in making the trip from the society here to the society there in the future...As part of the accepted wisdom of that transfer culture we understand that we may never achieve anything that goes beyond the culture itself. It may be, in fact, that it is the very nature of anarchy that we shall always be building the new society within whatever society we find ourselves.”¹

The journal *Social Anarchism* has long been a key resource in developing and nurturing this culture. It has played an important part in sustaining ideas and practices of anarchy against the dominance of archic ideologies. Art and literature, as well as economic and political analysis, have always found a home side by side in the journal's pages.

Unlike many movement publications of the last few decades, it has done so through thick and thin, high and low, surviving and even thriving both when movements have enjoyed an up-

¹ Ehrlich, Howard J. “Introduction to Reinventing Anarchist Tactics.” *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*. Ed. H. J. Ehrlich. Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996: 329–330.

surge, as after the anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999, and during periods of demobilization or stalled growth, as during the early 1990s. With the renewal of anarchist movements in the twenty-first century, *Social Anarchism* continues to provide one of the most important forums of anarchist discussion and debate. Few journals can make this claim. As someone who has spent years working in anarchist free schools and infoshops, as well as community and workplace organizing, I can attest to the ongoing relevance of *Social Anarchism* and its significance as a resource for anarchism over decades. For much of the 1990s *Social Anarchism* was a primary intellectual resource, even the resource for those seeking thoughtful and incisive analysis of a range of social issues, theories and practices of social change. Many free school classes right up to the present have made use of articles from *Social Anarchism* as key readings and starting points for discussion. Combining theoretical depth with consistent accessibility and respectful exchange of ideas, *Social Anarchism* has made and continues to make a crucial contribution to anarchist ideas as well as offering a real venue for learning about anarchism. It is, quite simply, essential reading.

Social Anarchism has always displayed the strongest principles of anarchism in action. It has maintained and supported a commitment to honest and sincere engagement. Avoiding the sectarianism and exclusivity that mar perhaps too many radical and movement-based publications, *Social Anarchism* has always remained open to new and alternative ideas, and critical interchange with opposing viewpoints and perspectives. Thus in this collection the reader will see principled debates and discussions with ideas that are often posed as being outside the realm of social anarchism, and which are even hostile toward it. A few of the perspectives encountered in this collection include individualist, Randian objectivism, neo-primitivism, anti-civilization, and, well, sociology (I say as a sociologist).

Social Anarchism exemplifies the sometimes forgotten basis of critique. Critique is not about dismissal or ridicule of op-

posing views. Rather it is about indentifying and maintaining that which is useful and insightful, while moving beyond that which is inaccurate and ineffective in analysis. *Social Anarchism* always “gets this.”

In truth, anarchism has always been social anarchism. Social concerns and commitments are the foundation of anarchist movements. This is so whether one talks about Peter Kropotkin and mutual aid or Emma Goldman’s notion of individuality, the works of anarcho-syndicalists and anarchist unionism, or the active anarchy of Colin Ward. Even the prefigurative anarchism of infoshops and free schools or the countercultural approaches to communal living or food production, often derided as lifestyle, are social in character.

The history of anarchism is marked by the proliferation of significant journals. These publications provide venues for debate and discussion on a range of issues — social, political, economic, and cultural. Over time and space — particularly during lower periods of social struggle — these works have served to connect people and sustain movements while introducing new people to anarchism. *Social Anarchism* takes its place alongside the other great journals of anarchist history, such as *Mother Earth* in the early twentieth century, mid-century’s *Anarchy*, and *Freedom*.

That *Social Anarchism* has survived and thrived over decades is a testament to the will and tenacity of its editors and to the continued relevance of its varied contributions. Producing and distributing a high quality thoughtful and informative anarchist journal over the course of decades is no small feat. As an editor of another decent social anarchist journal that had a good run but inevitably lost steam, the much lamented *Kick it Over*, which we put together out of Toronto for many issues, I can attest to the challenges and difficulties facing such projects. *Social Anarchism* continues to be an inspiration. Fueling capacities to understand and change social relations in the here-and-

now of everyday life while firing the imagination to envision a better future, it remains a vital resource and a darn good read.

The Best of Social Anarchism is in many ways the best of contemporary anarchism.

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