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Anarchist Economics

Review Essay

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Retrieved on 27th January 2021 from syndicalist.us
From Libertarian Labor Review #8, Winter 1990

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The Decline of the American Economy, by Bertrand Bellon and Jorge Niosi. Black Rose Books, 1988. \$16.95

Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow, by Peter Kropotkin (edited by Colin Ward). Freedom Press, 1985.

“The Wage System” by Peter Kropotkin; in Vernon Richards, ed., **Why Work? Arguments for the Leisure Society**. Freedom Press, 1983.

A casual observer of the anarchist movement, restricted to contemporary writings, could be forgiven for concluding that anarchists have no conception of economics. A serious debate recently was carried out in the pages of the British anarchist monthly, *Freedom*, arguing that all wealth comes from agriculture – that the working class is merely a burden the peasants and other agricultural workers are compelled to shoulder. The only possible conclusion from this line of reasoning is that we should dismantle the cities and factories and all return to agrarian pursuits. One suspects that farmers – suddenly deprived of tractors, books and other useful manufactured items and confronted with thousands of starving city dwellers cluttering

up perfectly good farmland that could otherwise be growing crops-might take a somewhat different point of view.

Bertrand Bellon and Jorge Niosi – who nowhere claim to be anarchists, despite the fact that their book is published by the foremost North American anarchist publisher – provide a better-argued, academic analysis that, in the end, is no less absurd. In the course of arguing that the U.S. economy has irretrievably lost its dominant position (and arguing for a new world economic order based upon tight-knit, highly integrated blocs characterized by heavy state intervention in capitalist economies), they make it quite clear that for them the primary economic actors are not classes or corporations but nation-states! Questions like unionization and wage levels are reduced to economic factors influencing the relative economic competitiveness of countries and regions. Indeed, for them the working class would appear to be increasingly irrelevant as we move into a post-industrial age. (Though they are critical of U.S. corporate management for their short-sighted and inept policies, and of the military build-up which is consuming our resources.)

Nor are class struggles permitted to intrude into this tidy economic picture. Bellon and Niosi blithely inform us, on page 70, that industrial relocation is a negligible factor in the economic decline confronting the U.S.'s northern industrial region. Instead, they assure us, the problem is the decline of certain manufacturing industries on which this area has depended. Yet the world has not stopped building or consuming cars, steel, clothing or shoes. Rather, the employing class has chosen to relocate production to regions and countries where workers can be compelled to work harder for less, and to automate and speed up production in order to reduce payroll. These are not natural phenomena, nor are these developments inevitable. They could be changed by an organized working class determined to wield its economic power in its own behalf.

Notions of power, social transformation, or the impact of the policies they advocate on workers in the real world never occur to Bellon and Niosi. Theirs is the highly abstract world of government policy, which in practice rapidly boils down to capitulation to the demands of capital, and to massive giveaways to our corporate masters.

An anarchist economics would look very different indeed. Although anarchists are of necessity interested in the workings of the capitalist economies, our attention is focussed on the class struggle, not on the battle between nations (in any event a sideshow, as the bosses have no country). An anarchist economics might study the theft of our labor by the bosses, the squandering of social resources by the state, and the channels through which the bosses manipulate markets, finance and production to increase their profits and to pit workers in different parts of the world against each other. Similarly, an anarchist economics would address itself to the problems of maintaining economic life in a revolutionary situation, and to the sort of economic arrangements which might function in a free society.

These are the questions Kropotkin addresses in the two works cited above, and which our Spanish comrades addressed in practice during the Spanish Revolution (efforts which are chronicled in Sam Dolgoff's *The Anarchist Collectives* and Gaston Leval's *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*). In *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, Kropotkin addresses himself to the practical problems of making a revolution – how we are to maintain production and distribution of necessary goods and services in the heat of, and following, a social revolution. In the process he established that, even in his day, a decentralized, self-managed economy could easily meet the needs of the population, and with much greater efficiency than under the prevailing capitalist (mis)organization. Those who believe that we will somehow be able to eliminate the need for work following the revolution will have little use for Kropotkin's

invaluable study, for he (like nearly all of our fellow workers) had no time to waste on such nonsense. Those interested in a genuine process of social transformation, however, will find much of value here. The Freedom Press edition is condensed from the original, with notes by Colin Ward that help to bring the original up to date.

Kropotkin's essay on the wage system conclusively demonstrates that a free society must necessarily abolish the wage system and money if it is to remain true to its principles.

Yet while Freedom Press has performed an invaluable service in keeping these works in print (and in affordable editions), our movement stands sorely in need of a more contemporary look at these issues.