

# A Meditation on Anarchist Ethics

Murray Bookchin

1994

Ulrike Heider, *Anarchism: Left, Right, and Green* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994; 153 pages)

In the late winter of 1989, one Ulrike Heider appeared at my home in Burlington, Vermont, for an interview, armed with a tape recorder, clothing for a weekend visit — and apparently a butcher's cleaver, looking for as much blood as she could draw from an unsuspecting victim. Citing an old anarchosyndicalist whom I knew as a reference and her plan to write a book on American anarchists as her aim, she was housed, fed, kept warm from the rigors of a Vermont winter, and treated in a comradely way. She was even taken to a small village, Charlotte, to attend a town meeting, to see how a form of face-to-face democracy functions even under the restrictions of the centralized American governmental system.

After three or four days of probing and note-taking, expressing a minimal number of her own opinions, she returned to her home in New York City and proceeded to write a book in her native German, *Die Narren der Freiheit (The Fools of Freedom)* — possibly one of the most malicious, fatuous, and basically immoral books I have encountered on the left in decades. I say this quite soberly, having experienced some most unsavory distortions of my work on the part of deep ecologists, socialists, self-styled anarchists, and, of course, the liberal bourgeois press. But seldom have I encountered such blatant character assassination and such deliberate distortions of ideas — not to speak of her willingness to read German traditions into the American context. This book, alas, has now been translated — with suitable modifications, additions, and deletions — into English under the title *Anarchism: Left, Right, and Green*, and has been reviewed by *The Guardian* in Britain.

I realize that Ulrike Heider has a book and a literary career to market. She also professes to be an anarchosyndicalist. How then, one may ask, can she effectively advance her career? Simple: Defame a relatively well-known anarchist, even under the pretense of praising him in the opening paragraphs. Distort his views from beginning to end, then ignore all passages in his works that contradict the distortions. Pull his words out of context, even when that context explicitly countervails the views that are imputed to him. When a quoted passage contains a sentence, phrase, or even a single word that fails to conform to the distortion, remove it and replace it with ellipsis points. Make his peripheral remarks seem of central importance to his ideas, and give his overarching themes little serious treatment or even mention. When quoting

him, omit the quotation marks that he put around potentially misleading words and phrases, and treat his obvious metaphors as if he intended them literally.

Create specious contradictions where there are none between his various works to make him seem intellectually unstable and opportunistically “contemporary,” as though he often bends with the winds of public opinion. Employ guilt by association by claiming to find similarities, no matter how tenuous, between his views and those of Oswald Spengler; the proprietarian Murray Rothbard; the late General Bastian of the German Green Party; and of course, the Bolsheviks and the Nazis. Mingle imagined ugly characterizations, often ad hominem in character, with words actually quoted from his writings, so that they all seem to come from his mouth or pen. Confuse his critique of “New Left” Maoism and Stalinism with an embrace of American nationalism, and his rejection of working-class “hegemony” in overthrowing capitalism with “hatred of the proletariat” [“*Arbeiterfeindlichkeit*” in the German original]. Attribute views similarly distorted to his companion, Janet Biehl, even if her own words must be tortured out of shape in the process.

Frankly, I find it degrading to have to deal with this kind of “polemical” sewage. But where someone has made a terrible stink, it is a civic duty to get to its source and clean it up. This is especially necessary when the sewage has found a place on the pages of the *Guardian*, a periodical that is doubtless notorious for its love of anarchists. Hence an overview of her distortions, with some detailed examples, is very much in order.

But where to start? Having placed the proprietarian disciple of Friedrich Hayek, Murray Rothbard, in an anarchist “pantheon” of her own making — despite Rothbard’s furious attacks on any alternative to capitalism and naked greed — Heider devotes some eighty pages to the libertarian Left: notably seventeen to her mentor, Sam Dolgoff, nine to Noam Chomsky, and forty-two to me. If Heider’s attention seems disproportionately directed toward me, its purpose becomes obvious once one enters into the bulk of the polemic, particularly her “method of critique of ideologies” (p. 7) and her ethics.<sup>1</sup>

*Method 1:* Give descriptive characterizations that have nothing to do with your subject’s actual point of view and use them to immediately prejudice the reader. *Example:* Since I describe the ultraleftist “Third Period” of the Communist International in the early 1930s — of which I was a part as a Young Pioneer and later a member of the Young Communist League (ages 9 to 15) — as “extremely revolutionary,” Heider, who apparently doesn’t know the First from the Second from the Tenth Period in the history of the Comintern, blanches with shock. “To my surprise,” says this breathless voyager into the labyrinth of the Left, “this eco-anarchist [Bookchin] critic of communism painted a remarkably positive picture of the Communist Party of his day” (p. 56). My “picture,” in fact, was neither positive nor negative but simply descriptive. Perhaps the better explanation for Heider’s “surprise” is her awesome ignorance of Communist history of the 1930s.

Accordingly, anyone who reads Heider with a modicum of knowledge about the Old Left may be “surprised” to learn that “it was not until the Hitler-Stalin Pact” (which, as we know, was concluded in 1939) that the Stalinists “became the reformist party of the Popular Front era” (which actually began in 1935). Her chronology, with this four-year omission, thereby erases the ideologically vicious rationale for the counterrevolutionary role played by the Communist Parties of the world during the Spanish Revolution of 1936, a role conducted precisely in the name of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all page numbers cited at the end of quotations herein refer to the English translation of Heider’s book.

Popular Front. Further, she muddies the issue of the Party's tacit support for the Nazis between 1939 and 1941, after which Russia was invaded by the Third Reich (pp. 56–57).

*Method 2:* Use innuendo. *Example:* “One wonders ... and wonders ... and wonders” — Heider's favorite phrase, by which she sugarcoats her venom as curiosity. Should a victim of Heider's “wondering” fail to have been an anarchist at birth, let him or her beware! If I cite my teenage admiration for Trotsky because he “stood alone against Stalin” in 1937, Heider climbs upon her high horse in the closing years of the twentieth century and maliciously inquires: “One might ask, of course, *why* that hero stood alone” (p. 58). To those who do not know, be assured that Trotsky did not “stand alone” in 1937 only because he was “the butcher of Kronstadt and murderer of anarchists,” as Heider would have the present generation believe. Apart from a small number of anarchists and independent leftists, relatively few American radicals knew about Kronstadt or Bolshevik atrocities against anarchists. Trotsky “stood alone” in the late 1930s because Stalin had corralled nearly the entire liberal establishment into collusion with him in the name of his allegedly “anti-fascist” Popular Front strategy. The smugness with which Heider looks down from her lofty perch of more than a half-century later on a time when the intersecting forces of liberalism and Stalinism assumed a highly complex form bespeaks an ahistorical arrogance of dazzling nerviness. Her “curiosity” and snippy remarks would make me steam with fury, had I not immunized myself from this kind of trash during my experiences in the Stalinist movement of the thirties.

Presumably, one must be born an “anarchist”: indeed, “What it was exactly [!] that converted [!] Bookchin to anarchism in the early 1960s” — actually, in the late 1950s — “is not entirely clear to me,” Heider observes with a sniff (p. 59). May I suggest that she could have received an answer in detail (my “conversion” was not a flighty affair) if she had asked me personally, when we met, instead of making it into a cryptic and possibly sinister mystery in her book.

*Method 3:* There is always a way of establishing that your subject is a “nationalist” — if he is American, possibly by overhearing him or her whistle “Yankee Doodle.” *Example:* This is one of Heider's most treasured methods of slander. “Bookchin did not *at that time [during the late 1960s] expound Americanism,*” writes Heider in an insidiously tantalizing manner, as though I ever “expounded Americanism” at any time (p. 59, emphasis added). What Heider is referring to is my opposition within Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) to its largely pro-Maoist leadership. Having planted this toxic little seed in the mind of the reader, Heider later drops to all fours and howls “nationalism” at me because I suggest that in the United States it is important for the Left to build on American, specifically Vermont, *face-to-face democratic* traditions (in contrast to the centralist and statist Maoist notions of the 1960s) in order to establish some meaningful contact with the general public, even the proletariat. No one would have accused Friedrich Engels of being a “nationalist” for invoking the radical traditions of the German people in his famous *The Peasant War* or Bakunin for invoking the radical implications of the collectivist mir, which he associated with traditional forms of Russian peasant landownership. But Bookchin? Heaven forbid!

*Method 4:* Play the race and the “Third World” cards! They seldom fail. *Example:* “Unlike Dolgoff and Chomsky,” Heider writes, “... Bookchin *never* seems to have been interested in the issues of race or the Third World” (p. 59, emphasis added). How the hell does she know? Did she query me about my activities in the Congress of Racial Equality during the early 1960s? Or my work as a shop steward in a predominantly African-American iron foundry? Or my work in the Puerto Rican community in New York's Lower East Side? Did she share my jail cells when I was ar-

rested for civil rights' activities during the 1960s? As for the "Third World," perhaps I should have demonstrated my concern for it by supporting Fidel Castro, as so many of Sam Dolgoff's confreres in the anarchist Libertarian League did. Or perhaps I should have cheered for Ho Chi Minh, as so many anarchists of Heider's generation did. Or perhaps I should have sagaciously quoted from Mao's infamous Little Red Book, as so many anarchosyndicalists were then doing.

*Method 5:* Consider every change in theory to be evidence of fickleness and instability, rather than the development of ideas over the course of time, and overtly or implicitly accuse your subject of trying to court popularity under new social conditions. *Example:* At the end of the 1960s, "[b]urned out by the big city," Heider writes, Bookchin "moved into his yellow house in Burlington" (p. 60). Sinister! — a retreat to the rural world of Vermont! In fact, I was not "burned out by the big city," and I departed for Vermont very reluctantly, mainly because much of the New York Left, including key members of my Anarchos affinity group, had debarked variously for Vermont, California, and all points of the compass after the collapse of the New Left in the city.

Moreover, because I tentatively supported a self-styled "socialist," Bernard Sanders, during his first term as mayor of Burlington, and tried unsuccessfully to win him over to a libertarian municipalist position, Heider now snidely writes that I now "prefer to overlook" this terrifying error. How would she have known about this "oversight" if I hadn't told her about it, with self-critical amusement? That I subsequently became Sanders's most vigorous left-wing opponent for a decade, writing sharply critical articles on him, remains unmentioned in her book, despite the fact that I discussed it with her in detail. Heider, needless to emphasize, regards all of this as evidence that I "turned [my] back on urban activism" and that "At each juncture [which?]" Bookchin "attacks former colleagues and friends [who?], espouses new theories ... [with a] kind of flexibility [that] makes him seem the exact opposite of such anarchists as Dolgoff and Chomsky, whose political positions have remained consistently rock solid" (p. 61). Really! I never knew that anarchism was a "rock solid" dogma or that the development of ideas in the face of changing conditions was apostasy! If development is to be dismissed as "flexibility," then I gladly plead guilty.

*Method 6:* When all else fails, blatantly misrepresent your subject's work and viewpoint, tossing in a few more innuendoes for extras. *Example:* Heider says, without mentioning names, that I have declared the "classic authors of the anarchist workers movement to be representatives of the 'libertarian municipal tradition' of [my] own historical construct" (p. 64). I have never declared such a thing, although I have pointed out that Bakunin supported the participation of anarchists in municipal elections, and that Bakunin and Kropotkin saw the commune or municipality as the locus of a libertarian society.

But here Heider cannot resist the opportunity to compound a blatant falsehood with one of her innuendoes: "the theoretical proximity of [libertarian municipalism] to the ideology of the [prefascist and quasi-fascist, as she puts it in a footnote] *Volksgemeinschaft* cannot be overlooked" (p. 64). Such an innuendo could apply quite lavishly to the communal orientation of Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin — indeed, to exponents of every form of social anarchism that is not fervently committed to the factory-oriented libertarian theories of anarchosyndicalism. With ignorance infused by venom, Heider must add that I suffer from "nostalgia, nationalism [!], and disavowal [!] of the labor movement" — this last a flippant misreading of my disavowal of the theory of proletarian hegemony, a largely Marxist notion to which Heider seems to adhere.

Thereafter, Heider lets another person, Howard Hawkins, speak for me as though his words were my own — despite the fact that I expressed strong public differences with Hawkins years before the English translation of her book appeared. What she cannot impute to me directly, she imputes to me through someone whose views, unknown to her readers, I have been obliged to criticize. In fact, it is Hawkins who has changed his views by supporting participation in state and national elections — but it is I whom Heider considers politically fickle.

*Method 7:* Caricature the person you are attacking, and then mock him for being the caricature you have created. *Example:* Heider was taken to visit the annual town meeting in rural Charlotte, Vermont, which is composed of ordinary working people, farmers, and a scattering of professionals, all neatly dressed for a special occasion. Heider, with incredible arrogance, apparently cast her Olympian eyes over the “lily-white” meeting and with unerring instinct knew to be “the most conservative ... I have ever attended in the US.” No one there, she assures her readers, would have responded positively to a proposal to end “capitalism” or to fight for “equal rights for African-Americans” (p. 67).

After the meeting, when Heider returned to my home and asked me why no people of color had been there, I informed her of the simple statistical fact that Vermont is the “whitest” state in the United States (over 99 percent) — a simple bit of factual information that Heider wilfully decided I *approve* of, making my remark incontrovertibly racist (pp. 67, 68). Responding to such an allegation is beneath contempt. In fact, Vermont is not only one of the “whitest” states in the United States, it is also one of the poorest. Nor are Vermonters in the habit of raising black and red flags, generating insurrections against capitalism, or any more than most young leftists I encounter today, singing the “Internationale.” But its town meetings have done a good deal more than meetings in many places in the world to belie Heider’s comparison (in the German edition of her book) of Charlotte citizens with supporters of the Christian Democratic Union.

For example: in 1982, the Charlotte town meeting, together with scores of other Vermont town meetings, voted for a freeze on the production of nuclear weapons in the United States. This step led directly to the American nuclear freeze movement. Like other Vermont town meetings, Charlotte’s has vigorously supported the rights of gays, women, and people of color. It voted overwhelmingly for a Jewish woman of Swiss birth to be governor of Vermont, and for the self-styled “socialist” Sanders to be the state’s lone congressman. It generally supports the most decent and humanitarian measures that are raised in Vermont town meetings. Nor is Charlotte plagued by skinheads who beat up immigrants and celebrate the birthday of Hitler in its taverns. Christian Democrats? Please, madam, learn the facts or else desist from commenting.

Yes, I celebrate the remaining revolutionary traditions of Vermont, fragmentary as they may be, and I do not hesitate to tell residents of the United States that they are worth retaining and developing. Nor do I take it amiss that Bakunin and Kropotkin celebrated what they took to be Russia’s democratic town traditions, nor that the Spanish anarchists took great pride in the radical traditions of the Iberian peninsula. May I add that I also celebrate Greek rationalism, philosophy, art, mathematics, and certain political achievements, which hardly makes me a Greek nationalist, and many aspects of the German philosophical and cultural tradition, which hardly makes me a German nationalist.

*Method 8:* When your subject uses words that might contradict the image you are trying to create of him, a bit of creative editing of his words can be helpful. *Example:* Two illustrations from the original German edition of Heider’s book are striking cases in point here. First: In *Die Narren der Freiheit*, during her discussion of my essay “Listen, Marxist!” Heider remarks, “From

his critique of neo-Bolshevik caricatures of the worker and from his lament for the reformist integration of the class struggle, Bookchin made a confusing leap of thought to a critique of workers and class struggle as such.”<sup>2</sup> This “leap” would be confusing only to those who demagogically insert such a “leap” into my work. Let me emphasize that the “leap” appears only in Heider’s mind, not in that or any other essay I ever wrote.

Yet Heider goes on to quote from “Listen, Marxist!” a passage in which I called it reactionary “to reinforce the traditional class struggle *by imputing a ‘revolutionary’ content to it*”<sup>3</sup> — but she coolly removes the words I have italicized here and leaves the reader to believe that I am opposed to class struggle as such. In the present English translation of her book, Heider has corrected these quotations. (Probably not coincidentally — these were points that I *specifically* objected to in a criticism I wrote of her German book in 1992, published in the German anarchist periodical *Schwarzer Faden*.) Nevertheless, even in the present English version, she asserts to the English reader that I think “class struggle” is “the root of all evil” (p. 73).

Second: In the German edition Heider quotes a passage from my book *Urbanization Without Cities* in which I included trade unions as among the types of organizations that anarchists believe to constitute the “social.” Apparently leaving the word *union* in the quoted sentence would have contradicted her image of me as bearing a deep enmity toward the working class. To rectify this situation, she tells her German readers that “Bookchin describes the concept of the social as encompassing ‘the family, workplace, fraternal and sororal groups, religious congregations ... and professional societies’.”<sup>4</sup> Although her ellipsis points may have ecologically saved a millimeter or two of space on the page, it must have required a sturdy willfulness on her part to use them to replace only one word — *union!* Again, on page 85 of the English edition she restores the word *union* to this quotation, but it is likely not coincidental that this was another point to which I specifically objected in my criticism of the German edition.

Moreover, I have long argued that capitalism has greatly developed, perhaps overdeveloped, the vast technological bases for abundance or a “post-scarcity society” — and I have also clearly emphasized that capitalism itself stands in the way of using its technology for human good. Heider confuses the necessary conditions for a post-scarcity society with its sufficient conditions. In her own inimitable words: Bookchin “says that economic need is no longer a problem” (p. 73). But that this were so! That we *could* have a sufficiency in the means of life *if* capitalism were removed is cynically transformed into the notion that we *do* presently have a sufficiency in the means of life *even under capitalism*. Need I emphasize that capitalism is based precisely on enforced scarcity, without which a profit system would be impossible? That Heider does not seem to understand this fact unfortunately reveals her ignorance not only of radical theory but of the very “historical materialism” that she invokes against me, as we shall see.

---

<sup>2</sup> “Von der Kritik an der neobolschewistischen Karrikatur des Arbeiters und der Klage ueber die reformistische Integration des Klassenkampfes macht Bookchin einen verwirrenden Gedankensprung hin zur Kritik des Arbeiters und des Klassenkampfes schlechthin.” Ulrike Heider, *Die Narren der Freiheit* (Berlin: Karin Kramer Verlag, 1992), p. 90. All references to the German edition are henceforth indicated by *NDF*, followed by the page number.

<sup>3</sup> For the original passage in “Listen, Marxist!”, see Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Berkeley: Ramparts Press, 1971; republished by Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986). It appears on page 186 of this book — and not on page 208, contrary to Heider’s footnote, one of several erroneous page citations.

<sup>4</sup> “Bookchins Beschreibung des Sozialen bezieht sich auf ‘Familie, Arbeitsplatz, bruederliche und schwesterliche Gruppen, Religionsvereinigung ... und Berufsorganisationen’”, in *NDF*, p. 105. The passage she quotes is from my *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship*, republished in Canada as *Urbanization Without Cities* (Montreal: Black Rose Books), p. 32.

So who is it, in Heider's view, that I hold "really to *blame* for capitalism" (p. 73, emphasis added)? It is "the working class," says Heider, since I wrote in "Listen, Marxist!" that "a precondition for the existence of the bourgeoisie is the development of the proletariat. Capitalism as a social system presupposes the existence of *both* classes" (p. 73).<sup>5</sup> The truism that wage-labor cannot exist without capital any more than capital can exist without wage labor is transformed, in Heider's ever-puzzled mind, into a potentially reactionary assertion: "Is [Bookchin] saying that it may have been a mistake to try to unseat the bourgeoisie?"

That the interrelationship between wage labor and capital is a concept that was developed in the socialist and anarchist movements of the last century seems to totally elude her. But (Heider tells her readers) "for Bookchin, class struggle becomes the root of all [!] evil" — which is Heider's unique interpretation of the basic radical concept that class society as such is *one-sided* and the class struggle that it generates is symptomatic of its diseased condition. This is a view that is traditional to all radical theories that wish to abolish class society and thereby the class struggle itself. One might think that Heider would have understood this basic idea before she undertook to write about social theory — or would that be asking too much?

Apparently it would, since my reminder to Marxists that "the history of the class struggle is the history of a disease, of the wounds opened by the famous 'social question,'" becomes in Heider's contorted mind a condemnation of the struggle by oppressed classes as such. *Precisely* because I regard class society as a disease, indeed, as evidence of humanity's one-sided development, Heider, who reads with her fist rather than her brain, suggests that I want to *retain* the bourgeoisie (again: "Is he saying it might have been a mistake to unseat the bourgeoisie?") and suggests that I think "the proletariat [should] have been booted out first." Let the reader not think that I have made up a word of this! These coarse formulations appear in all their splendor on page 73 of Heider's warped and sick book.

*Method 9:* Try throwing *everything* up for grabs and run wild in whatever direction you can. If you pile up enough distortions, *some* of them are bound to be accepted. *Examples:* Like many Marxists and anarchist alike, I admire much of work of Charles Fourier. If you are Ulrike Heider, however, you will trot out only the absurdities that this remarkable but wildly imaginative utopian presented and impute them to me (p. 69). Do I advance the principle of "unity in diversity" in my ecological writings? Splendid! Heider simply denigrates "diversity and variety" as an "old liberal [pluralistic] postulate" (p. 70). Do I cite "prey and predators" as means of stabilizing *animal* populations? "Dangerous ground, this," Heider exclaims, that could lead to "social-Darwinist" conclusions about population control (p. 70) — as though I were not a militant opponent of attempts to deal with population as a mere numbers game. Indeed, living as I apparently do in a "fog of utopian promise" for my advocacy of decentralized communities and ecologically sound practices, I am guilty of advancing a "daring blueprint for techno-utopia" in my 1965 essay "Towards a Liberatory Technology," when "only a few months earlier [I] had been so opposed to technology" — a contradiction for which she adduces not a single line of support from my writings (p. 71). Because I draw on aspects of the past to offer alternatives for the future, my "vacillation between past and future is more extreme than Kropotkin's" — whose "vacillation," presumably, is pretty bad (p. 72).

---

<sup>5</sup> Although Heider tells us this quote comes from page 242 of *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, it is actually found on page 220.

*Method 10:* If all else fails — lie. *Example:* In the introduction to my book, *The Spanish Anarchists* (written in 1972 or thereabouts and published in 1977), roughly three paragraphs allude to certain cultural similarities between the Spanish movement and the 1960s counterculture. On page 59 I described the efforts of the Spanish movement to combat alcoholism and sexual promiscuity among its members in order to prevent the degradation that had historically occurred among working people in all periods of industrialization as traditional social relations were eroded — and as was occurring in Spain itself. This is a fairly standard observation that appears in all accounts of Spanish syndicalism in the last century. But Heider smells “countercultural” heresy here, and all her alarm bells go off. I am, it appears, “most [!] impressed by the Spanish anarchists who took up vegetarianism, anti-alcoholism, nudism, and ecological gardening,” she declaims. My “heart warms to the communalist-localist village anarchists and their clan-consciousness” and to the Iberian Anarchist Federation’s (FAI) “*grupos afinidad* [sic],” rather than to those who were “organized in unions or workers’ councils [sic]” (p. 90).

That most of the 325 pages of *The Spanish Anarchists* are devoted to detailed descriptions of various peasant and working-class *sindicatos*, their organizational forms, their strikes, their insurrections, and their daily struggles totally evaporates from Heider’s description of the book. Indeed, her readers learn that Bookchin “sees the entire FAI (Federaci“n Anarchista [sic!] Iberia [sic!] as a consolidation of affinity groups,” *all* of which was structured around affinity groups, and that I see the “climax [!] of the Spanish Revolution [!]” as “the CNT congress in Zaragoza, at which the *utopian faction* [!] of the anarcho-syndicalists won the day,” as Heider writes with a minimal knowledge of Spanish spelling or of the Spanish movement. In fact, the Zaragoza Congress of the National Confederation of Labor (CNT), of early May 1936, occurred some two months before the outbreak of the civil war, and its work is hardly exhausted by the word *utopian*. The congress, in fact, readmitted the reformist *Treintistas*, many of whom were to reinforce the conciliatory policies of the CNT leadership toward the State and the bourgeoisie as the war went on.

Worse still: “Here Bookchin is in agreement with the *utopian* Malatesta, for whom the unionist version of anarcho-syndicalism is a defection from ‘pure’ anarchism. Following the argument of the historian Vernon Richards, which was bitterly challenged by Sam Dolgoff, Bookchin interprets the CNT’s wavering between revolution and compromise with historical reality [!] as reformist *Realpolitik*” (p. 90). As it turned out, in the years following the civil war, the majority of the CNT itself finally decided that its greatest blunder had been exactly this reformist *Realpolitik*. Put bluntly, Heider has literally described anarchism as a “utopian” fantasy if it is not rooted in a crude economic syndicalism, and gallingly dismisses any anarchist theorist or vision of a libertarian society that is not oriented overwhelmingly toward factories and trade unions!

I have cited these “methods” and “examples” primarily to show the ethical level on which Heider functions. There are more, and still more, and more after that. There is her claim that I have discarded social revolution for cultural revolution, as though the two were radically incompatible with each other (pp. 73–74). There is her accusation that I think that “the capitalist bourgeoisie [sic] has the ability to deal with crises and class struggle and that classes *within* capitalist society will disappear” — a nonsequitur if there ever was one (p. 74, emphasis added). There is her complete failure to comprehend the difference between the *potentiality* for an ethics in natural evolution and the absurd notion that nature itself is ethical, a view that she tries to attribute to me (pp. 76–77). There is her imputation that I regard human beings as “passive” in relation “nature,” which is *precisely* the view of many deep ecologists, who I have been challenging for more than a



decade on precisely this point (p. 77). There is her caricature of my view that maternal love gives a child a rational sense of otherness. In Heider's tunnel vision this is evidence that I consider the "mother-child symbiosis" to be "an ideal and a permanent condition" of "inequality, helplessness, and power," marked by the "passive-exploitative greed of the infant and the omnipotence of the mother over her helpless offspring as an eternal, unalterable condition!" (p. 77). Heider's exclamation mark does not help me understand who is dominating whom here — whether the "omnipotent" mother or the "exploitive" infant. In any case, both are pitted in eternal mutual combat.

Dare I invoke the simple anthropological datum that the kinship tie and what Heider calls "Stone Age women" played "a pivotal role" in prehistory, and Heider, chilled to the bone, declares that such formulations "in their German translation have a frighteningly familiar [read: Nazi — M.B.] ring" (p. 79). Dare I suggest that band or tribal elders formed the earliest type of hierarchy, ages ago, because of their physical vulnerability, and Heider worries that this — yes, you guessed it — "could lead the naive reader to believe that euthanasia might be useful" (p. 80)! Be warned that Heider is deeply concerned that my emphasis on usufruct in organic society — a word whose meaning she appears not to understand — deplorably suggests that I "reject Engel's [sic!] version of original communism *because* it allegedly [!] includes the ideas [sic!] of collective property" — not only a dazzling nonsequitur but a grotesque miscomprehension of my views (emphasis added, p. 81).

Apparently, our "anarchosyndicalist" has quite a vulgar, economic Marxist dimension. As though we were all sitting adoringly at the feet of Ernest Mandel, Heider cries that I distort Marx when I suggest that (in her paraphrase) he "proposed to subject nature to man in the manner of a patriarch, *thus* despiritualizing not only labor, but also the product of labor, the commodity" (p. 81). The word *patriarch* here, I may add, was spun out of Heider's head, not out of mine, as is the crude formulation she imputes to Marx. Dare I suggest that work or labor would be "playful" in a free society — that is, an aesthetic activity — and I am immediately characterized as steeped in a "utopian imagination" — a notion that seems to cause Heider to retch. We are even treated to a largely incoherent defense of Marx that reveals a bumbling level of economic understanding. Thus, Heider declares that I "ontologize the commodity and its 'essence,' that is, its utility [read: use] value" (p. 82), which, of course, would turn it from a commodity into a functionally useful object! Put in simple English, this means that I want to fight for a society that produces goods to meet human needs ("utility value"), not commodities that yield profits. Exactly what the rest of the verbiage in Heider's "critique" is supposed to mean, I am obliged to leave to her and to Sam Dolgoff, her mentor on anarchism, who is now, alas, beyond our mortal reach.

Having suggested that I believe that elderly people (presumably including myself) should commit suicide, I am also a strong advocate of inequality because I write that the notion of "justice" is based on the false "equality of unequals." This is an inequality that is physically and socially created, let me emphasize, and that either unavoidably exists from person to person because of physical infirmities from one stage of life to another and/or is imposed by hierarchical and class rule. This condition, I go on to emphasize, must be remedied by the realm of Freedom, creating a substantive "equality of unequals." Alas, Heider *never* cites this contrast: It is enough for her that I dared acknowledge the existence of inequality of any kind, irrespective of the need to rectify it in a rational society. "Any theory [!] of 'inequality,'" she declaims, "whether in the name of liberation or feminism, whether *justified* by notions of 'diversity' or 'complementarity,' is intrinsically undemocratic and beats a path straight to the political right" (p. 91).

I am not at all sure I know what Heider is talking about. Does she really think we are all really “equally” strong, healthy, wealthy, and powerful, as legal fiction would have it, in this presumably “just” but eminently unfree society? Are we to impose upon ill, elderly, and weak persons the same social responsibilities that we impose on healthy, young, and strong persons? Anyone today who defended such a notion of “justice” — whether they called themselves socialist, anarchist or liberal reformist — would indeed be on the political right. In a society based on the ideology of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, with their indifference to human suffering precisely in the name of juridical “equality,” no attempt would be made to equalize the differences that burden the very young, the very old, the disabled, the ill, and so on.

Still further: In my book, *The Ecology of Freedom*, Heider writes, “capitalism is neither mentioned nor criticized” and anarchism “is discussed only as a negative example of what we *don’t* want” — a pair of blatant fabrications whose inclusion in Heider’s book must surely rest on her hope that her readers will never examine my book. Indeed, from an espouser of utopias, I turn into a committed advocate of negative liberty. Heider, it would seem, is totally indifferent to the fact that I discuss the nature of a future society in considerable detail in the last two chapters of the book.

As to my writings on the city, the farrago of distortions, misstatements, and whole fabrications that mark her discussion are too dizzying to examine in detail. Heider says I “banish ... the city from the history of ideas” (p. 85) — even though I have written several books on cities, including *Urbanization Without Cities*, a massively historical as well as interpretive defense of the city against urbanization. Thus it would appear that I am a ruralist pure and simple. That I examine in detail in *Urbanization Without Cities* the historical development of various liberatory traditions in cities gives her occasion to mockingly paraphrase its message as “Long live the past!” (p. 83). The reader learns that my view of history is “idealistic” largely because I challenge Marx’s “historical materialism” (p. 84). Moreover, I make little more than a “half-hearted attempt” to criticize Athenian “misogyny, xenophobia, and slavery” (p. 85); and I allude to the “noble ancestry” of Greek democrats — an allusion that Heider turns into a “stress” and that obviously means that I *favor* aristocracy (p. 85). I “seem ... to identify [!] with Aristotle’s horror of the ‘rule of the many over the few’ or *even* of ‘the poor over the wealthy’” (p. 85) simply because I mention those notions — hence I am *against* democracy and favor oligarchy, the rich, and presumably patriarchy. Indeed, I need only mention a thinker and discuss his or her ideas — and Heider feels free to attribute them to me.

The quagmire of Heider’s dishonesty seems almost too limitless to plumb. Having unburdened herself of these totally contrived falsehoods; having suggested that I think the elderly should be put to death; that I consider the working class to be the real source of present-day social problems; that I abandon Marx’s “historical materialism” (God forgive me!); that I favor the rich over the poor — Heider then goes on to apprise her readers that my “urban ideal” is the village (p. 87); that I “despise industry more than industrial exploitation” (p. 87); and that my model is “the tribe, village, handicrafts, small trade [!], small capitalism [!]” (p. 87). Once again we hear Heider repeat the refrain whenever she comes across views of mine that diverge from Marx’s: “*One cannot help* but be reminded of the caste particularism of the fascists, their differentiation between working capital and greedy capital, their glorification of the past, and their moralistic vision.” (Emphasis added, p. 88)

Let us, then, reverse Heider’s distortions and opine in Heiderian fashion: “*One cannot help* but be reminded that Heider is an economic determinist, that she regards the loving relationship

between mother and child as exploitative, that she believes in the ‘domination of nature,’ that she wants to ignore the lessons of the past, and that she has no moral vision at all.” I will leave it to the reader to tally up the vulgarity and viciousness of her “criticism” — and her unspeakable demagoguery.

In fact, Ulrike Heider’s political ideas, as I have already suggested, seem to be guided by a vulgar Marxism, which she tries to defend in the name of anarchosyndicalism. Indeed: “I am influenced by the method of critique of ideologies as it was first developed Marx’s *The German Ideology*,” she writes in her English introduction, “in which he revealed the false consciousness of his contemporaries and explained it out of the objective historical situation” — which “situation,” for Marx — and Engels (who also had a big hand in the book) was largely economic. To drag in virtually all the leading figures of the Frankfurt School as further influences on herself, plus Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and Karl Korsch is to make a mockery of a brilliant albeit disparate body of thinkers. Considering the low level of Heider’s criticism, I would regard her invocation of their names as a pure pretention.

Heider essentially disposes of Noam Chomsky in some nine perfunctory pages, largely filled with biographical and, more warily, with a few theoretical synopses. Poor chap: he is, in Heider’s eyes, a “fellow traveler” of anarcho-syndicalism. (p. 37) Which disposes of Chomsky. Her enormously overwritten account of the proprietarians or “anarcho-capitalists,” on the other hand, seems like nothing more than filler material. Her tract would seem like little more than a diatribe against me if she did not add on nearly sixty pages to give it book length. Having known Murray Rothbard, the centerpiece of her account, for a time, I find that I agree with Sam Dolgoff, who Heider quotes, that he and his ideas are “repulsive.” Although Rothbard eschews any anarchist orientation whatever (he even attacked me as an anarchist with vigor because, as he put it, I am opposed to private property), Heider tells us that he “is *viewed* in anarcho-capitalist circles [which?] as the latest addition to their hall of fame” — which includes, I suppose, such “anarchists” as the Austrian School of laissez-faire economics and that avowed paragon of “selfishness,” Ayn Rand. Thereafter, Heider fills page after page with clumsy disquisitions on Max Stirner, Benjamin Tucker, Carl Menger, F. A. Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and greater and lesser heirs of Adam Smith. Thus the “book,” having filled enough pages to qualify as more than a mere pamphlet, can now be unleashed on the public with a fetching and basically misleading title.

One may reasonably wonder which tried, fast, and unswerving anarchists Heider actually *does* admire. After all, she disposes of Malatesta as a “utopian” (p. 90); of Fourier as a quack, “often comically naive” (p. 91); and of Kropotkin as a queasy “vacillator.” Let it not be said, however, that Heider is without heroes. The looming figure in Heider’s book is really Sam Dolgoff, a man I knew well from 1965 to 1976. I helped him prepare his book on Bakunin after he despaired that he would never be able to publish it, and I personally presented it with a strong recommendation to my editor, Angus Cameron, of Alfred A. Knopf, which did publish it.<sup>6</sup> I should add that it was I who suggested that Dolgoff edit a book on the Spanish collectives (he initially wanted to write an account of Bakunin’s relationship with Nechayev), and I wrote the preface for it, which he then censored because I expressed my disagreement with the CNT’s entry into the Madrid government.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Sam Dolgoff, ed., *Bakunin on Anarchy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> Sam Dolgoff, ed., *The Anarchist Collectives: Workers’ Self-management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936–39* (New York: Free Life Editions, 1974; republished by Montreal: Black Rose Books). I should add that all this publishing activity happened after the old Libertarian League, to which we had both belonged in the mid-1960s, dissolved and

In Heider's book, many of Dolgoff's more ungracious attitudes resurface in her treatment of the Spanish anarchists, as well as Malatesta, and Vernon Richards (whom Dolgoff detested for his criticism of the Bakunin book and of the CNT-FAI's entry into the Madrid and Catalan governments in 1936). Inasmuch as Dolgoff is no longer with us, it would be unfair to criticize him for views that he cannot personally defend. In fact, despite her admiration for him, Heider essentially reduces Dolgoff to a crusty schoolteacher who "grades" anarchists from Bakunin to Isaac Puente (a man largely unknown outside of Spain) on the degree to which they were "realistic" syndicalists rather than "utopian" anarchists. In Heider's eyes, Dolgoff suffered from only one major failing: he shared "the counterculture's romance with Native American tribalism" (p. 36), which she coolly extrapolates from the fact that Dolgoff hoped that "Third World" peoples would not abandon the more cooperative features of tribal life. In all fairness to Dolgoff, I believe this to be either a typical Heider distortion or else an example of her fatuousness.

More disquieting is the favorable account she gives to Dolgoff's political pragmatism — which, if accurate, would be very disturbing. She glows as she observes that Dolgoff "prefers [!] antifascism to principled adherence to dogma" (p. 29) — that is, to revolution — as though conducting a revolution in Spain in 1936–39 were in contradiction to the struggle against the Francoists, as the Stalinists were to claim. He regarded it as a "malicious defamation," she observes approvingly, to accuse the CNT leadership of discarding its anarchosyndicalist principles when it entered the Madrid and Catalan governments and the FAI of turning into an expressly electoral party machine (p. 29). She invokes the old canard, which she imputes to him, that the takeover of Barcelona and much of Catalonia by the CNT's rank-and-file militants could be equated to "establishing an anarchist dictatorship" (p. 29), presumably comparable to the top-down party dictatorship established by the Bolsheviks — as if the CNT-FAI had not *relinquished* power won by its rank-and-file in Catalonia to the thoroughly discredited State, increasingly infiltrated by the Stalinist minority in the country (p. 29). Dolgoff, Heider proudly tells us, supported American participation in the Second World War "as a necessary evil for destroying Nazi rule" and was "puzzled how liberal academics like George Woodcock or anarchists purists like Marcus Graham ... could be so relentless in their opposition to the war" (p. 28). If all of these compromises with the State are necessary, then why bother to be an anarchist at all? Throughout the twentieth century, nearly all the "lesser evils" that Heider says Dolgoff adopted were palmed off by Social Democrats as excuses for reformist practices.

In fact, Dolgoff, we learn from Heider, was "the last anarchist." She finds him to be a man who "never wavers as he sails between the Scylla of anarchist nostalgia and the Charybdis of anarcho-futuristic daydreams, always arriving back into safe harbor" (p. 37). Perhaps — but I doubt if Dolgoff would have chosen to be shipwrecked on the rocks of Heider's extremely crude pragmatism, which is no different from the most opportunistic practices of the German Greens — all her professions of anarchosyndicalism to the contrary notwithstanding.

But now that "the last anarchist" is no longer alive, "one wonders" (to use a Heider literary stylism) how anarchism can possibly survive. Indeed, how qualified is Heider to judge who is an anarchist — past, present, or future? An overall view of Heider's book indicates clearly that

---

Dolgoff found himself in a political limbo, even offering to turn over the correspondence of the defunct League to my Anarchos group. Still, we had political differences from the very day I joined the Libertarian League (in 1965), to its self-dissolution and long afterward. Thus it was not because of our political disagreements that Dolgoff and I "parted company," as I believe he says in his memoirs. Quite to the contrary, we retained a very close relationship well into the 1970s. His account of our relationship in his memoirs is simply false.

it combines a crude economic Marxism with an extremely narrow-minded syndicalism, in which a future, presumably rational society would be structured around mere trade unions and factory operations. There is every reason to believe that the word *anarchism*, with its historic commitment to the confederation of municipalities — the famous “Commune of communes” — is in her eyes completely “utopian” and that she merely hijacks the word to add color and pedigree to her simplistic trade-unionism — a world that, by her own admission to me, she personally knows little about.

Finally, and by no means unimportantly, “one wonders” as well what happened to ethics along the way — especially among radicals who profess to be antiauthoritarian, ethical socialists. Herein lies a question that is worth meditating upon today, especially when so many self-styled anarchists lie, distort, and edit ideas with moral standards comparable to those of junk bond dealers and corporate raiders.

September 27, 1994

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Murray Bookchin  
A Meditation on Anarchist Ethics  
1994

Retrieved on April 28, 2009 from [dwardmac.pitzer.edu](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu)  
Originally published in *The Raven: Anarchist Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Winter 1994), pp. 328–46.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**