

Review: A New World In Our Hearts

A New World in Our Hearts: Eight Years of Writings from the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation — edited by Roy San Filippo (AK Press, 2003); 139pp. \$11.95

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The Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation lasted from 1989 to 1998. It was a long-lasting and serious effort to form a North American revolutionary anarchist federation. It would certainly be very useful to have a selection of the wide range of writings produced by the Federation, from its newspaper (also called Love & Rage) and its internal bulletins, together with a solid and informative introduction. This is not that book. Instead, it is a short volume with a highly personal selection of written work, reflecting the current politics of the editor.

The editor does not choose to select writings on many aspects of the period in which Love and Rage existed. Anti-patriarchal struggles, for example. Struggles of African-Americans. Our Mexican section. Our support for Eastern European resisters. Anti-war issues (particularly the 1991 Gulf War). Prisoners. The living wage campaign. Labor struggles. None of these activities make it. Nor does it include Ron Tabor's serial critique of Marxist theory.

Rather than discussing any of this, the introduction by Roy San Filippo rapidly goes into the final collapse of Love and Rage (2/3 of the introduction). This took the form of an internal conflict mostly between two caucuses (factions) — the background being the general decline of the left in this period. San Filippo puts all the blame on one of the factions — the one which I supported at the time. Very briefly, one faction was abandoning anarchism in favor of a Maoist version of Marxism-Leninism. The other faction fought to maintain a belief in anarchism, while aware that further theory and practice were necessary. The introduction does not discuss the Marxist-Leninists, but instead heatedly denounces the anarchist faction for our “purism and sectarianism” as well as “arrogance” in being “dogmatic” because we continued to support revolutionary anarchism. Following the introduction there are twenty articles, two by supporters of the pro-anarchist faction (one by me) and eleven by our opponents, showing the lopsided nature of the editing.

This little book has four sections. The first, ANARCHY, is a loose collection of pieces. It includes a brief critique of Weatherman politics and two pages on the black bloc. There is a ‘Draft Proposal on the State’, which has worn well, I think. Dealing with the possible needs for coordination of a revolutionary army during a civil war, it said, “The anarchist ideal is democratic popular

militias...We advocate only as much centralization and discipline as is temporarily necessary to win the revolution...with as much internal democracy as possible.” (p. 15)

There is an article by Chris Day, ‘Dual Power in the Selva Lacandon’. Day was to become the key initiator of the anti-anarchist faction. The piece is formally within the framework of anarchism and it says some interesting things about the Zapatistas. In hindsight there are several striking things about the article. One is that it raises weaknesses of anarchism without proposing any alternatives. For example, it calls the idea of a popular militia defeating a counterrevolutionary army “naïve”. It doubts that the Zapatistas would be able “to create a stateless, classless society” even if they won, but gives them uncritical support anyway because “they may be able to take things a few steps closer”. (pp.30–31)

The worst is a cynical paragraph saying, “there are the supposed structures of dual power that are under the domination of an aspiring elite...These...may actually constitute a dramatic step forward...” “The people may really gain,” Day claims, “from such a new set of bosses.” (pp.18–19)

There is a philosophical discussion by Matt Black, which was to lead to his rejection of anarchism. Unfortunately none of the responses to his statement are included. There is Chris Day’s ‘The Revolutionary Anarchist Tradition’. This piece, as it stands, reads like a pro-organizational perspective on anarchist history, virtually a Platformist statement. It covers Malatesta, the Platform, the FAI, and the Friends of Durrutti. What is not obvious is that this is a watered-down and cleaned-up version of his original document, ‘The Historical Failures of Anarchism’. That document went considerably beyond this version in its rejection of anarchism. It claimed that only a centralized, authoritarian army could win a revolution. Without reprinting this paper it is hard for readers to figure out what the shouting was all about. Instead of reprinting any of the responses to Day’s original document, the book includes a piece by me responding to a part of his paper on why the Spanish revolution was defeated.

The second section is labeled ORGANIZATION. It begins with ‘Love and Rage in the New World Order’, an article by Chris Day (altogether the editor chose eight articles by Chris Day, in whole or part, out of the twenty). This was his famous “reprole” document, claiming that the key constituency for L&R should not be the working class or other oppressed. Instead it should be young adults from the middle class whom the bad economy was forcing down into the working class from which their parents had once escaped (re-proletarianization). This thesis sank like a stone. But what was almost unnoticed at the time (1994) was Day’s overt rejection of anarchism, “Calling ourselves anarchists identifies us not as anti-authoritarians but as ideological dinosaurs...The weight of anarchist history is...a set of concrete boots dragging us to our deaths in the muck at the bottom of a stagnant lake.” (p.63) Instead he praises the European autonomists, who were neo-Marxists.

This is followed by a former Love & Rage editorial, ‘What Kind of Revolutionary Organization is Useful Today?’ It rejects both the vanguard party and the temporary autonomous zone in favor of revolutionary pluralism. That meant to unite a range of legitimate mass struggles in a democratic and popular fashion, in which the anarchist organization would fight to make the movement as participatory, open, and militant as possible. I think this much remains valid. Unfortunately this was counter posed to a working class perspective, even to seeing the working class as at least one of the key forces for liberation. Instead the three main struggles were listed as against white supremacy, support for the Zapatistas, and opposition to prisons and the criminal justice system. The concept of a prefigurative organizational perspective is raised in a piece by Matt Black followed by an account of the limitations of an infoshop.

The third section is on RACE. It is not about the struggles of African-Americans but about how white people should deal with their racism. Most of this (three out of four pieces) is from the viewpoint of the 'Race Traitor' journal, started by Noel Ignatiev (These views are now supported by the Bring the Ruckus organization in the U.S., of which the editor is a supporter.). The exception is an L&R editorial, 'Building a Multi-Racial/Multi-National Revolutionary Anarchist Organization'. At the time, the editorial was something of a compromise and no grouping in Love and Rage was really happy with it — although I continue to agree with the goal of the title, while the Race Traitor/BTR people are against it.

San Filippo begins the dispute on this topic in his editorial, criticizing a statement by the pro-anarchist faction that is actually reprinted in the last section. He criticizes the statement because "systematic white privilege was dismissed in [their] document as 'petty and apparent' privileges of white workers over workers of color" (p.2). What we actually said in 'What We Believe' was, "We call on white workers to give up their apparent, petty privileges over people of color, privileges which tie them to the ruling class. This is not so the whites will be worse off but guilt-free, but so that they will be both materially and morally better off" (p.99).

This means that racism is bad for the whole working class, including the white majority. Because of racism, the workers have few, weak, unions and limited social welfare benefits, certainly as compared to the Western European or even Canadian workers — even in spite of the famous U.S. high standard of living. Therefore, it would be in the interest of the white workers to fight against racism. Anarchists can appeal to them, not only on moral grounds but also on grounds of material self-interest. Compared to what the workers could get from the capitalists — even under capitalism — the benefits the white workers get from racism are only apparent (the psychological wages of whiteness, as it has been called) and/or petty (real but relatively small in comparison). This is a class orientation that does not subordinate the interests of Black workers to whites.

In the RACE section the main pieces argue that white workers get major benefits from racial privileges, benefits which must be destroyed before the working class can unite against capitalism (as opposed to advocating class unity against white racism). This makes it hard to appeal to white workers, I should think, since people do not like to give up benefits for themselves and their families. It would also be hard to appeal to Black workers, since, they said, it would be racist for a mostly-white revolutionary organization to offer ideas to Black people (meanwhile white and Black politicians and church people do not stop saying whatever they want to the Black community). This leads very little for radicals to say to anyone. Of the ending of racist and imperialist privileges, Day, Jessica, and Olson declared of their program, "This will mean a quantitative reduction in the standard of living for many workers in the imperialist countries in general and for white workers in the U.S. in particular. Winning privileged workers to this necessity is a daunting but no less crucial aspect of revolutionary work in the U.S." (p.90). Daunting indeed!

Similarly, Noel Ignatiev (founder of the Race Traitor concept), wrote, "The abolitionists [i.e. advocates of the Race Traitor political line] consider it a useless project to try to win the majority of whites, or even of working class whites to anti-racism." (p.79). Instead, he proposed to organize a minority of radical whites to give up their privileges and thereby force the system to attack the rest of the white workers, pushing them in a revolutionary direction. We need "only enough counterfeit whites — race traitors — to undermine the confidence of the police, etc., in their ability to differentiate between their friends and enemies by color...The coming together of a minority determined to break the laws of whiteness so flagrantly..." (p.80).

It is not entirely clear what this means, but apparently these race traitor whites would get into fights with the police so often that the police would tend to beat up whites as frequently as they beat African-Americans. This would, he thinks, radicalize the general white working population. But what if the cops could distinguish between the minority of radicals and the rest of the white population? Or what if the other whites could see that it was a minority of white radicals who were provoking the police, and blame the radicals, not the cops? (He does note that some would turn to fascism.) Frankly, it is one thing to reject racism but another thing to propose an elitist trick to force white workers into racial justice. We need a program which really can win the majority of white workers to anti-racism, because it is good for them as well as being good. A united, non-discriminating working class can win more from the capitalist class even now than the whites can gain from racist privileges. (In an appendix, some women objected to the sexist implications of Ignatiev's claim that the state protected white women.)

There is nothing wrong with reprinting these pieces, since they were a major current in the Love and Rage Federation. It is wrong to let them go almost unchallenged by any of the other viewpoints in the Federation. This could have laid the basis for further discussions in the movement. But this is not done. In this as in other ways, the book is an attempt to use the reputation of Love and Rage to support the views of a present-day political current.

The last section is labeled LOVE AND RAGE. It covers the final faction fight and the end of the organization, just a few years before the explosion of anarchism after the Battle for Seattle. It is as biased as the rest of the book. Of five documents, one is the founding statement of the pro-anarchist grouping, 'What We Believe'. There are three statements by the anti-anarchist grouping and one by a Race Traitor supporter who supports the anti-anarchist grouping. The major documents of the anarchist tendency are not included—just as the major documents of the anti-anarchists are not. It is not mentioned that, after Love and Rage, the anti-anarchists went on to openly embrace Marxism-Leninism, many joining the Freedom Road Socialist Organization.

'What We Believe' said, "Anarchism [is] central to our politics. There are historical failings of anarchism, but they can be dealt with from within anarchism. Anarchist mistakes occur within a basically liberating vision [unlike Marxism]. ...We must learn from other traditions of struggle, such as Black nationalism or feminism or ecology, but what we learn must be integrated into revolutionary anarchism." (p.97) This is what the editor denounces as "...a step toward a dogmatic and purist brand of politics..." (p.3) What he seems to object to is the commitment to anarchism in the first place.

The difference between anarchism and Marxism-Leninism — despite overlaps in some areas — is fundamental in their goals. Anarchism seeks to replace a society of bosses and workers, of oppressors and oppressed, with a self-managed society run by the direct, decentralized, democracy of its working people. Marxism-Leninism, whatever its insights, aims at a society run by a revolutionary minority, a centralized party, managing a centralized state and a centralized economy. The difference between these goals has nothing to do with either side being more dogmatic than the other.

I am not going to argue the case for pro-organizational, working class, revolutionary-socialist anarchism here. It was one current in Love and Rage's politics, even if not the one that came to predominate. Someday a more balanced book, reflecting the range of political currents in Love and Rage, will be published. I look forward to it.

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