Wayne Price
The Ethical Anarchism of Cindy Milstein
Review of Cindy Milstein, Anarchism and Its Aspirations
(2010), Oakland CA: AK Press.
August 29, 2011

http://anarkismo.net/article/20408
Review of book by Cindy Milstein, providing an overview of the anarchist movemnt at this moment, as she sees it. The review gives a critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of her ethical approach to anarchism.

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Here they either fail or succeed, in which case they are integrated into the hierarchical society (there are plenty of successful coops, but they are no threat to capitalism). But what if alternate institutions did become threats to the established institutions? What if anarchist-led cooperatives threatened to replace the giant corporations which produce steel or autos or gasoline (which is…unlikely!). Then the other businesses would boycott the cooperatives, deny them loans, refuse to let them use the transport system. The state would raise their taxes, pass impossible-to-follow regulations, or just outlaw them.

This is not a criticism of building cooperatives or living in a bohemian style. These may be good in themselves. But they are not a suffient strategy for changing society. In short, there is no alternative to the "classical" anarchist revolutionary strategy of building popular movements, among the workers and all oppressed groups, prefiguring the future by being as democratic as possible in the mass organizations, fighting against the bosses and all oppressions—aiming for an eventual insurrection of the working class and all the oppressed.

Milstein's focus on ethics is absolutely correct. In particular I like her commitment to democracy (direct democracy), which many anarchists reject. But we do not have to choose between values and a materialistic analysis of how capitalism works and how it can be challenged. Whatever Marx—or Bookchin—thought, these are not incompatible perspectives. A moral analysis can show us the goal and cause us to reject the current system. A materialistic analysis can offer guidance as to which forces are going in a libertarian direction and which are moving in a regressive direction. And morality can, again, guide us in deciding which to choose. That is a discussion and a decision. Cindy Milstein's book is a valuable contribution to that discussion.

Contents

It is the workers who most directly feel the oppression of the capitalists on their backs, so to speak. Therefore the workers are most likely to resist the oppression of the capitalists. At least, more likely than bank managers, farmers, or police officers. In any case, the workers, at the very site of exploitation, are in a better position to resist capitalist oppression than are "citizens" randomly selected from various classes.

And the working class—as a class—overlaps with all other oppressed groups: women, GLBT people, People of Color, oppressed nations, prisoners, etc. That these oppressions must also be fought does not mean that class exploitation should be ignored. Quite the contrary. The greatest revolutionary potential is where class and nonclass oppressions overlap (as with Black women workers).

Milstein's Strategy

Similar to other advocates of a "new" or "renewed" anarchism. Milstein does raise a strategy. "*…Small-scale projects—from bike cooperatives to free schools…[contain] the kernels of destroying the current vertical social arrangements*" (p. 15). "*The idea is that people establish counterinstitutions as well as lifeways that gain enough force…to ultimately exist on a level with, or finally in victorious contestation to, centralized power*" (p. 46). She is also for direct action and demonstrations, but this seems to be the center of her strategy. This is not really a "new" strategy. It goes back to Proudhon's mutualism (a credit union of sorts which would grow to peacefully replace capitalism and the state). He counterposed this to building labor unions or to aiming for a revolution.

Milstein does not discuss the "classical" criticism of this strategy, let along refute it. The problem—then and now—is that the capitalist class rules the state and, obviously, the market. Alternate institutions are only allowed to exist at the margins.

Rather, she notes, "*Bookchin's writings pointed to the city or neighborhood as the site of struggle, radicalization, dual power, and finally revolution…*" (p. 84). I am all for community organizing, but the community—by itself—does not have the potential oppositional power of occupied workplaces in a general strike, of shutting down an economy—and of starting it up in a different way. Bookchin carried his views out to the end, to advocating an electoralist strategy of seeking to get his followers elected to local governments (cities, counties, or towns). There they were supposed to use the local state structures to create libertarian communism (Biehl, 1998). This was an unrealistic reformist scheme (Milstein does not raise it).

Anarchist Strategy

While many anarchists simply reject the insights of Marx, Milstein believes that his work is useful for anarchists. "*More than anyone, Karl Marx grasped the essential character of what would become a hegemonic social structure—articulated most compellingly in his Capital…*" (p. 21). She refers favorably to Marx's explanation of the commodification of society under capitalism. But she does not refer to the way he describes capitalism as creating the working class as a collective agent in the process of production.

Also, she misstates the nature of economic "value," the foundation of prices, in Marx's theory. She writes, "*'Value' is determined by how much one has to exchange and accumulate: money, property, or especially power over others*" (p. 21). Not at all. To Marx, "exchange value" is the socially necessary labor time spent in producing a commodity (that is, it is as if the commodity embodies the labor spent in making it). Consistent with the rest of her perspective, she leaves out the importance of the worker in creating capitalist value.

Cindy Milstein is a speaker and writer who is well-known to US anarchists. There seems to be hardly an anarchist conference or bookfair which she does not speak at and usually has been involved in organizing. Her rapid-fire speech is as well-known as her open-mindedness and friendliness to people from all trends within anarchism. She is also prominent as a former student of Murray Bookchin (1921—2006). Coming out of the anarchist-communist tradition, he was extremely influential. This book is a reworked collection of a few of her essays. It serves as both an introduction to anarchism and an overview of the current state of the anarchist movement (community, milieu, or whatever)—as she sees it.

There is much to like about this little book. While Milstein is Bookchin's follower in many ways, she does not continue his method of discussion. Bookchin was famous for drawing sharp lines between his views and others, such as "deep ecology" or what he called "life-style anarchism" (Bookchin, 1995). He attacked these opposing views vituperatively and intemperately, despite the fact that his opponents agreed with his goals. Milstein, on the contrary, believes "*Anarchists attempt to find harmony in dissonance…*" (p. 64). She seeks to include all trends within anarchism. "*Anarchism…is a way of asking the right questions without seeking a monopoly on the right answers*" (p. 73).

However this also may be somewhat of a weakness. On life or death questions, during a revolution, say, there may be only one right answer, or at least only one thing that can be done. After so many failed revolutions (Spain being only the most famous), we cannot be so cavalier about trying to have the right answers. Milstein does not suppress her own views on issues in dispute, but she does not bring out what the inter-anarchist disputes are about and what each side has to say. Since I disagree with her on several points, I find this unfortunate.

Anarchism's Moral Vision

Her approach to anarchism is based on ethics, ideals, a moral vision. "*I firmly believe in the expansive ethical sensibility that has marked anarchism as a tradition*" (p. 3). "*Communism's overarching project is to ensure the communal good*" (p. 13). "*Ethics still animate anarchism, supplying what's most compelling about it in praxis.…From the outset, anarchism grounded itself in a set of shared values*" (p. 25).

This approach is superior to that of Marxism. While Marx's work is drenched in moral passion, this is not expressed in his theory. You can read shelves of Marx's works (and I have) without finding a statement that "communism seeks the communal good" or that people "should" be for socialism (communism). Socialism is seen as something that will happen, replacing capitalism, without giving reasons why we should be for it. At most, Marx and Engels expressed an alternative, "ruin or revolution," or "socialism or barbarism" (in Luxemburg's phrase)—but not why we should chose socialist revolution over ruin (which may seem obvious but remains a moral choice).

Historically anarchism is rooted in a moral critique of capitalist society and an ideal vision of a new society of freedom, equality, solidarity, and justice. Milstein is quite right to focus on this, as did Bookchin, her mentor. The problem occurs when a theory is limited to a moral-only approach. Yes, libertarian communism is good, communally and individually, but how can it come about? What can we do, strategically, to create it? What are the social agencies that can create socialism? Instead of "the proletariat" or "the wretched of the earth," Milstein and other Bookchinites believe that social change will be brought about by good people, citizens, "*people capable of sustaining a new society*" (p. 69), ignoring class or background.

To his credit, Marx created a theory of how capitalism works, what trends in it are moving toward socialism and what are moving against it (towards barbarism). What is

the social force to create the new society? Marx believed in the centrality of the working class created by capitalism, a collective agency brought together by modern industry and modern cities, pushed to become aware of our oppression and to revolt against it. He saw workers as a leading grouping in an alliance with other oppressed groupings of people.

Anarchists disagreed with much of Marx's program: the transitional state, centralized economy, and electoral strategy. But Milstein notes that the "*classical anarchists*" also "*looked to forms of worker-oriented socialism*" (p. 27). She reports this as a historical fact, but does not discuss why they did this.

Bookchin fiercely rejected the idea of the revolutionary potential of the modern working class (see "*Listen Marxist!*"; in Bookchin, 1986). He noted the nonrevolutionary consciousness of most workers today—which is true (for now), but is also true of the whole population (the majority of which is working class).

Milstein does not repeat Bookchin's denunciation of "proletarian socialism." But she distinguishes between "classical anarchism" and "renewed anarchism." This is another version of the two trends in modern anarchism, as expressed by Uri Gordon, David Graeber, and others (Price, 2009). By "classical anarchism" she means what Schmidt & van der Walt (2009) call "the broad anarchist tradition." Classical anarchism, she claims, suffered from "*a workerist orientation…*" (p. 83). She does not explain what she means by "workerism" or why she rejects it. Instead she mentions five influences on "renewed anarchism," none of which include workplace struggle among their efforts. (The broad anarchist tradition included those who combined working class struggles with nonclass issues of gender, nationality, etc. Unfortunately it also included those who wrongly had a wooden class-only approach. But supporting nonclass struggles does not require rejecting the importance of workers' struggles.)