Reply to ACF

Murray Bookchin

1996

Dear Comrades,

Thank you for sending me a copy of your review of my pamphlet, Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism. This was a courtesy I seldom encounter on the so-called 'Left' in the U.S. and U.K. You have my sincere respect for your probity and for the comradely way in which you examine my work. You may be right that I am "ignorant of the Anarchist movement in Ireland and Britain". I do not receive any periodicals from either country, and alas, my limited income at the age of seventy-five does not allow me to subscribe to overseas periodicals. Hence my failure to deal with the situations in your countries. If comrades in Britain, Ireland, Scotland and Wales would care to send me their periodicals, I would read them eagerly and send in exchange the periodical I occasionally produce, Green Perspectives.

But to keep the record straight, I did not mean to argue that the movement abroad is entirely given over to lifestyle anarchism. I do know, however, that it is a problem in Germany and the Netherlands, and comrades from Britain have complained to me that it exists there as well.

My pamphlet, as well as my book, Re-Enchanting Humanity (a harsh critique of postmodernism, primitivism, deep ecology, socio-biology, and technophopia that has just been published by Cassell), are concerned with a massive trend in contemporary society: an ideological counter-revolution against the entire revolutionary tradition and the best elements of the Enlightenment. Antirationalism, mysticism, and hatred of civilisation as such are so widespread that, not unlike Heideggar's desire for 'authenticity', they reflect and even articulate the bourgeoisie's success in fragmenting social life and directing millions inward toward privatism and egoism.

It is all too facile, I think, to blame this trend entirely on a consumerist culture and what is called productivism. Now that capitalism has disintegrated most community ties — and every workers' movement was also, often unknowingly, a civic movement — the oppressed and exploited are now "on their own," as it were. Capitalist society is the most masked society to have appeared in history. Its sources of exploitation have traditionally been concealed by the "three factors of production" and similar notions. But not since economists abandoned the labour theory of value for the myth that profit consists of the 'wages' of the capitalist have the masks that conceal the true nature of capitalist social relationships been so numerous and varied. In the U.S., astrology, religion, Asian mysticism, and a multitude of supernaturalisms, including rituals in the name of ecology or earth goddesses, make it impossible to see the sources of economic exploitation and hierarchical domination. If 93 per cent of the American people believe in a supreme being; if

more than 80 per cent believe in immortality; and if more than 60 per cent believe in the existence of angels, then people of rational and humanistic thought have their work cut out for themselves. I would ask whether comparable figures exist in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales.

Not only have these ideologies impeded class consciousness in the U.S.; they have become substitutes for social action of almost any kind. Thus a short time ago, when Clinton literally rolled back social welfare to the pre-New Deal era by dumping single mothers and their children from the welfare rolls, there was not a single protest demonstration of note in American cities. Any cheap religious fundamentalist can rally tens and hundreds of thousands of people, but not one political organisation can bring a few thousand people into the streets to protest the withdrawal of guaranteed assistance (which has existed here since 1935) to improvident women and their children.

So we are much in need of a movement that operates against the system as a whole; that shows the connections between single-issues and roots them in capitalist social relations. Yet some of our leading 'Left' intellectuals are hindering rather than helping the development of radical movement. Chomsky has recently called for strengthening the centralisated state and has joined some of our local social democratic organisations — Democratic Socialists of America and The New Party. At the beginning of this summer he reportedly declared that he would vote for Clinton while "holding his nose." Yet he still avows a belief in Anarchism — "as a vision". Probably many Labourites in Britain also believe in socialism — as a "vision"- but will hold their noses and support Tony Blair.

As to the American counter-culture — and you can include here much of the ecology 'movement' as well as the new left of the sixties — the potentiality of which I was concerned has not been realised. I do not fault myself for trying to expand the horizon of anarchism in the sixties along cultural and ecological lines. I regret only that I failed, not that I saw the wrong possibilities for profoundly changing our society. Tragically, many self-professed anarchists didn't even try to do much back then and have since abandoned their convictions for private life and academic careers. Surely failure doesn't mean that one shouldn't try. Every meaningful opportunity, including working class organising, must be explored, enlarged, and deepened if anarchist communists (among who I have always counted myself) want to build a viable movement.

As to the state of civilisation today: granted, it's a mess. I never claimed it was otherwise. But argue that together with the horrors that have existed from time immemorial, it has also been marked by real progress. Unlike me, the primitivists really attack civilisation as such. Should anarchist communists go along with this mentality, which once again masks capitalist social relations with the virtues of primitive 'innocence' and 'authenticity'? True, I have always insisted that "production for the sake of production" is undermining our planet. But this phrase, taken from Marx, is not only an ideology, like the notion of endless growth, it stems very real grow-or-die imperative of capitalist accumulation — unrelenting market competition. Concepts like civilisation and growth must not only be defined in ideological terms — and they certainly have become ideologies. They must be related to the market system, which grimly reflects their meaning in society. Given the masked nature of capitalism, the naive could accept the characteristically bourgeois thesis that declines in employment are due exclusively to technological advances, rather than to market imperatives to utilise new technologies to make profit. I certainly agree that we need a new civilisation, indeed that we must become civilised enough to build a rational society; but I would vigorously oppose any ideology that enjoins us to drop to all fours and bay at the moon.

My views on libertarian municipalism are entirely orientated toward creating a dual power composed of directly democratic assemblies of the people in revolutionary opposition to the state. The idea that "libertarian municipalists" should try to "capture the local State" and operate within a statist framework is totally alien here. Quite to the contrary, my hope is that a movement can be created that builds on whatever local democracy still remains in a community — and tries to enlarge it into a direct face-to-face democracy, with the intention of throwing it against the state on all levels, up to the central government.

In short, I treasure the historical appeal for a "Commune of communes" that surfaced in French revolutions and to some degree in Spain in 1936. If this perspective is not understood — and I have developed it at book length in my From Urbanisation to Cities (also available from Cassell) — none of my views on democracy or politics will be understood. In any event, a truly libertarian municipalist movement will always be a minority movement even within neighbourhood, town, and, village assemblies, until the masses are prepared to finally dissolve state power and replace it with communalist federations. When erstwhile "libertarian municipalists" deny this project and try to qualify its demands with social democratic compromises and pacifist approaches, I always vehemently object. Similarly you can be assured that any "disciple" who favours nationalism in any form is not, in my eyes, a libertarian municipalist.

These remarks cannot convey the full scope of my views. At least three of my books have recently been published by Cassell and are generally available in your area. Others are published by Black Rose Books and AK Press. I would ask any reader of Organise! to consult these writings to learn what my views are and not take the words of my critics — be they lifestyle and liberal anarchists, orthodox, neo- and post- Marxists, new agers, or deep ecologists. You might care to know the critical literature on me — often quite ad hominem in character — has become fairly sizeable. Much of it is directed against my revolutionism, denouncing it, in typical social democratic fashion, as "sectarianism," "dogmatism," and (in conjunction with Bakunin!) "anarcho-Leninism." But I suspect such charges have been levelled against you yourselves — precisely because you are committed to revolutionary change. Nothing rankles the walking dead of the sixties who have been co-opted by the existing society more than pricks of their post revolutionary conscience.

With comradely best wishes,
Murray Bookchin

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