

A few comments on Post-Left Anarchy

Ian McKay

April 2, 2009

Contents

Reply to Bob Black 10

Well, family and personal illness has ensured I missed the G20 protests. Instead, I've gotten into a discussion of "post-left anarchy" on the anarchy list, as a "Post-Left" anarchist has joined and wished to discuss it. So I thought I would share some of my thoughts here as well, plus post an old letter in reply to Bob Black defending his (false) assertion that most Italian syndicalists became fascists.

Well, family and personal illness has ensured I missed the G20 protests. Instead, I've gotten into a discussion of "post-left anarchy" on the anarchy list, as a "Post-Left" anarchist has joined and wished to discuss it. So I thought I would share some of my thoughts here as well, plus post an old letter in reply to Bob Black defending his (false) assertion that most Italian syndicalists became fascists.

To be honest, I don't see much point in such discussions. The whole "Post-Left" thing is vague at the best of times, so discussing it is like trying to nail jelly to a wall. At best, it seems to be reinventing the wheel by re-stating long-time anarchist positions like they were new. At worse, it seems somewhat irrelevant and spends most of its time attacking other anarchists for being too "leftist" (a nice and vague insult if ever there was one).

The newbie to the anarchy list proclaimed that if anarchism was a form of libertarian socialism then "post-left anarchy" was not anarchist. Which raises the obvious question why its adherents want to associate themselves with anarchism (which they term "left-anarchism"). If you look at it objectively, the "post-left" people are just as socialist (or communist, if you want) as the rest of us. They are against private property, exploitation, wage labour, workplace hierarchies and so forth. They are, whether they like it or not, **libertarian socialists** – why they don't like to acknowledge that is another question... Perhaps it is the American political climate which demonises "socialism" (in all its forms, equating it to Stalinism usually), a climate they are adjusting themselves to?

It seems like a lot of energy and time wasted over silly definitions and jargon. Although seeing someone state that *"post-left anarchy in no way reflects Libertarian Socialism"* makes me wonder why they hang around in anarchist circles. The same thought crosses my mind with "anarcho"-capitalists as well (who, like "post-left" anarchists are mostly US-based and call anarchists "left-anarchists").

This all reminds me of the **Wildfire** collective in **Freedom**, which started its (short) time there with an attack on all other anarchists! When asked to be specific on what they actually advocated and to answer a few calls for clarification, neither was done. They managed to avoid answering the somewhat pertinent question of how they saw how London, a city of 8 million-plus people, disappearing into the primitivist utopia. That provoked me to write the section on primitivism in AFAQ (although I did have to rewrite it as it was being interpreted by some in unintended ways!). If they cannot answer a serious question on such an important matter, I would say that their ideology is vague for a reason — to appear more radical than they actually are — Ken Knabb made that point in his excellent exchange on primitivism (also, Andrew Flood's dismantling of primitivism is worth reading).

I must, here, point out the obvious fact that “Post-Left Anarchy” and Primitivism are **not** the same thing. And that I know perfectly well that **Anarchy** magazine is not primitivist.

The newbie said that Leftism 101 by Lawrence Jarach influenced him, so I had a read of it. I’ll ignore the potted history of “leftism” (which starts with liberalism and such like) and look at the comments made against “left” anarchism. Perhaps others will find them of interest?

“They are quick to quote Bakunin (maybe Kropotkin too) and advocate organizational forms that might have been appropriate in the era of the First International, apparently oblivious to the sweeping changes that have occurred in the world in the past hundred-plus years”

Not sure that any modern anarchist supports the particulars of Bakunin’s secret societies, but in terms of popular organisations most do see the need for workers to organise themselves at the point of production and federate for mutual aid (industrial unions). Yes, capitalism has seen sweeping changes over the past hundred-plus years but there are still bosses and workers are still exploited and oppressed in the workplace. Are post-Leftists “*apparently oblivious*” to this? Or the fact that by organising ourselves, we workers can improve our conditions?

Much the same can be said of community assemblies, something Kropotkin pointed to as something libertarians would seek to create — and which the Argentine people applied during their revolt against neo-liberalism. I can only assume that they were, also, “*apparently oblivious to the sweeping changes that have occurred in the world in the past hundred-plus years*”.

Somewhat ironically, this echoes the perspective of an actual proper leftist, Chris Harman (one of the leaders of the British SWP). To quote from section H.1.4 of AFAQ:

Harman states that the assemblies were “*closer to the sections – the nightly district mass meetings – of the French Revolution than to the workers’ councils of 1905 and 1917 in Russia*” and complains that a “*21st century uprising was taking the form of the archetypal 18th century revolution!*” ... Did the Argentineans not realise that a 21st century uprising should mimic “*the great working class struggles of the 20th century*”, particularly that which took place in a mostly pre-capitalist Tsarist regime which was barely out of the 18th century itself?

So for both the Leftist and “Post-Leftist”, different groups of people in revolt seem “*oblivious*” to the important changes in the world. That the “*organizational forms*” they spontaneously developed or advocate as part of their struggle reflect the ideas of people around “*in the era of the First International*” (or before!) hardly seems a problem, quite the reverse as they seem relevant to people in struggle. It suggests that perhaps the likes of Bakunin and Kropotkin may be worth reading after all, and building on rather than rejecting as out-of-date....

At least the “post-leftist” is not harking back to the soviets of 1917, but then he does not offer any insights on what “*organizational forms*” would be “*appropriate*” today.

Perhaps because if he did then it would become clear exactly how “post-left anarchy” and anarchism differ — or not? Keeping it vague ensures you can sound very radical...

“and they then have the gall to ridicule Marxists for remaining wedded to Marx’s outdated theories, as if by not naming their own tendencies after other dead guys they are thereby immune from similar mistakes.”

Outdated? Well, anarchists were critiquing Marx’s theories at the time so it is not that they are “outdated” but the fact they were flawed even then that was/is the problem with Marxism. And it is a case looking on the ideas of Bakunin and Kropotkin as a source of inspiration, rather than a holy script to be implemented regardless. Thus we take the need for the oppressed to organise themselves, to use direct action and solidarity to achieve their goals rather than, say, talk about trade unionism (as Bakunin, for example, did — today, industrial unions or strike assemblies are far more appropriate and, as a result, anarchists advocate those and point out the problems in trade unionism splitting up workers in different unions).

Just as “dead guy” Kropotkin’s ideas on community assemblies were proven to be of merit in Argentina, perhaps “dead guy” Bakunin’s ideas on self-managed unions rooted in union assemblies may be of use today for striking workers? Many anarchists think so — and for good reasons. Obviously, of course, it is the principles of workplace organisation, strikers assemblies, federation from below-up, mandated and recallable delegates which are the key, but specific forms. Thus unions and workers’ councils are both valid examples of libertarian ideas in this area, although they are not identical (Bakunin pointed to both, although he did not use the term “workers’ council”).

“The drawbacks and problems with Marxism, however—for example that it promotes the idea of a linear progression of history of order developing out of chaos,”

Really? Where did Marx postulate that? If anything, that comment reminds me of the start of that classic Japanese TV series **Monkey!**. This will make many British anarchists of a certain age smile, and it did have an extremely funky theme tune:

“freedom developing out of oppression,”

Okay, given that oppression exists how else will freedom come about other than “out of” it? Given that freedom can only be achieved when the oppressed abolish their oppression, I’m not sure what is meant by this statement. Anarchists have argued that the oppressed, by fighting their oppression and oppressors, create freedom, create the possibility of a free society (as well as its organisational framework).

So I’m not sure what is meant by this assertion. Unless this is a reference to the purely Marxist idea that we need a “new” state which will wither away, which anarchists have also rejected? Or Engels’ notion that all forms of organisation are authoritarian? Hard to tell, really.

“material abundance developing out of scarcity,”

That is, a post-scarcity society? That capitalism has created the possibility that we can all have a decent level of living standards? Or does it mean something else? Will a “post-left anarchy” involve scarcity? Or does it mean that abundance has a social

context and that a free society may not require/need/desire a lot of the products produced under capitalism? Hard to know, to be honest.

Material abundance depends on what people want. A material abundance of plastic popes which glow in the dark would be substantially different in a society rooted in Catholicism than in a future anarchist society. So while this assertion may sound like it means something, I'm not sure that it does.

I would suggest that an aim of anarchism would be decent living standards for all, a level of material abundance which can ensure that people do not want for shelter, food, medical care, and so forth. It does not mean the universalisation of mindless consumerism, the alienated consumption for the sake of consumption modern capitalism, via advertising, seeks to create. What is considered decent living standard would, obviously, rest with individuals — and those willing to co-operate with them by providing the materials and labour required to reach it.

But, then, as this comment (like the rest) is woefully under-developed, it is left to the reader to impart meaning too it — so there is a possibility that I'm wrong in my speculation on what could be meant here.

“socialism developing out of capitalism,”

Again, capitalism exists — we live in it. Socialism will be created once it is abolished, so in that sense socialism *MUST* develop *“out of capitalism”* — unless you postulate another class system after capitalism. Simply put, a free society will inherit the legacy of the (class) society that went before it. We will still be living in the towns and cities capitalism created, for example, the day after the revolution (to use a somewhat inaccurate cliché). We will have the industrial structure we had the day before. We will have the same housing stock. The task of a free people would be transform and change that legacy, getting rid of what is harmful and useless, changing what is useful to make it more human and eco-friendly, creating new ways of working and living and so forth. Yet it has a starting place, namely the legacy of the capitalism we were fighting — that much, surely, is obvious?

Unless it is meant the traditional Marxist notion that we need capitalism *FIRST* to develop the means of production before we can have socialism, is something anarchists have rejected. Marx mocked Bakunin about this in the 1870s, for example.

Or perhaps it is meant the marxist notion that socialism *AUTOMATICALLY* develops from capitalism, as in the historical progression of feudalism, capitalism, socialism/communism? But anarchists raised the possibility of a new class system after capitalism, namely state “socialism” (or state capitalism) where the state bureaucracy becomes the ruling class. So anarchists have traditionally questioned the assumption that socialism (in the sense of a free and classless society) automatically comes after capitalism — and, as a result, suggested means which are consistent with the ends desired (for example, building the new world in the shell of the old). I would suggest that such a Marxist position helped undermine the Russian Revolution, as it allowed the Bolsheviks to ignore the negative impact of their actions — after all, socialism comes after capitalism so no need to worry!

But, again, neither of these positions are shared by anarchists

“plus an absolute faith in Science as the ideologically neutral pursuit of pure Knowledge,”

Science is the gathering of evidence and the generalisation of theories based on those facts. Of course scientists can be ideologically non-neutral, being selective in what facts they pick and what conclusions they draw. As, for example, can be seen from the Darwinism of the late-19th century. In response, Kropotkin used the scientific method to gather facts and generate facts which refuted the ideological assumptions of the scientists. In other words, the scientific method can be used to question the assumptions and theories of accepted science.

Stephen Jay Gould, who was not only an actual scientist but also (I assume) a “leftist”, put it well (as quoted in my evaluation of Kropotkin’s Mutual Aid):

Noted scientist Stephen Jay Gould was right to *“criticise the myth that science is itself an objective enterprise, done properly only when scientists can shuck the constraints of their culture and view the world as it really is ... Scientists needn’t become explicit apologists for their class or culture in order to reflect these pervasive aspects of life.”* Recognising this obvious fact suggests that science *“must be understood as a social phenomenon, a gutsy, human enterprise, not the work of robots programmed to collect pure information”* and so science, *“since people must do it, is a socially embedded activity.”* Even facts are *“not pure and unsullied bits of information”* as *“culture also influences what we see and how we see it. Theories, moreover, are not inexorable inductions from facts. The most creative theories are often imaginative visions imposed upon facts; the source of imagination is also strongly cultural.”* Science *“cannot escape its curious dialectic. Embedded in surrounding culture, it can, nonetheless, be a powerful agent for questioning and even overturning assumptions that nurture it ... Scientists can struggle to identify the cultural assumptions of their trade and to ask how answers might be formulated under different assertions. Scientists can propose creative theories that force startled colleges to confront unquestioned procedures.”*

So the genuine scientist recognises that science (with or without the capital S) is not immune to ideology, that it is (like so much else) shaped by the society it is in. But the scientific method can expose any ideologically driven “science” for what it is.

And I’m not sure what the alternative to the scientific method would be? Just assertion? Ignoring science? Denial of facts? A return to mysticism and holy books and their absolute truths? Sticking your fingers in your ears?

“and a similar faith in the liberatory function of all technology”

All technology? Really? Well, Kropotkin repeatedly stressed that many of the applications of technology were driven by the need to make profits and dominate the market. He also stressed that a free people would transform their workplaces once they managed them. So I would conclude from that he was well aware that not “all” forms of technology were “liberatory” but that at least some forms of technology could

be used in oppressive and exploitative ways, and that some of it would be transformed and some of it abolished as nothing more than an aid to exploitation and oppression.

I would also suggest that this statement shows a massive lack of imagination — it assumes that workers would simply return to their old workplaces and change nothing (bar electing a factory committee to run it instead of a having a boss). But the whole point of workers' self-management is that people would change things (as Kropotkin suggested). Charlotte M. Wilson, for example, stated that it was "*certain, however, that, when they find themselves their own masters, they will modify the old system to suit their convenience in a variety of ways ... as common sense is likely to suggest to free men.*" [**Anarchist Essays**, p. 23] Quite!

And as Murray Bookchin noted, a specific forms of technology can be used in different ways by different societies. I quote him in section H.3.12:

*"Technics ... does not fully or even adequately account for the institutional differences between a fairly democratic federation such as the Iroquois and a highly despotic empire such as the Inca. From a strictly instrumental viewpoint, the two structures were supported by almost identical 'tool kits.' Both engaged in horticultural practices that were organised around primitive implements and wooden hoes. Their weaving and metalworking techniques were very similar ... At the **community level**, Iroquois and Inca populations were immensely similar ...*

*"Yet at the **political** level of social life, a democratic confederal structure of five woodland tribes obviously differs decisively from a centralised, despotic structure of mountain Indian chiefdoms. The former, a highly libertarian confederation ... The latter, a massively authoritarian state ... Communal management of resources and produce among the Iroquois tribes occurred at the clan level. By contrast, Inca resources were largely state-owned, and much of the empire's produce was simply confiscation ... and their redistribution from central and local storehouses. The Iroquois worked together freely ... the Inca peasantry provided corvee labour to a patently exploitative priesthood and state apparatus under a nearly industrial system of management."* [**The Ecology of Freedom**, pp. 331–2]

Does this suggest "*faith in the liberatory function of all technology*"? I doubt it.

"—are the same drawbacks and problems with the anarchism of Bakunin and Kropotkin. All of this seems lost on left anarchists."

Probably because that is not actually true. And so were Bakunin and Kropotkin "left" anarchists as well? Sounds like they were, assuming that these strawmen assertions were correct — but they are not. Yes, they are vague enough to ensure that we can get into a pointless discussion on what was "really" meant, vague enough to sound important, but they are not really based on anything more substantial than personal dislike of certain things labelled "leftist."

I'm all in favour of bringing anarchist theory up to date, utilising new facts, ideas and arguments to make it stronger. I just think that "post-left anarchy", with its somewhat ironic fetish of defining itself in terms of what it hates, is not doing that. At best, it reinvents the wheel. At worse, it produces a lot of vague, radical sounding

but hard-to-put-your-finger-on rhetoric as well as lots of negative attacks on other anarchists for not being “pure” enough, or being “leftists” or whatever. In the process, any actual positive contributions they make is lost. People just turn off, as I did with **Anarchy** magazine as I got sick of prolier-than-thou “I’m more anarchist than you left-anarchist fakes” attacks. It gets a bit boring...

I’ll end with reprinting a letter from **Black Flag** I wrote in reply to one Bob Black sent in after we ran an eariler version of section A.5.5 of AFAQ (the version in AFAQ now was reprinted recently in **Anarcho-Syndicalist Review**). Which is amazing is that, in spite of the facts being presented, he sticks to his guns and continued to assert that most syndicalists became fascists (but then, he did the same thing as regards to his claims about the WSM and secretly editing the Platform. I’ve seen the assertion that the Italian anarcho-syndicalists became fascists repeated quite a few times since then by “post-left” anarchists, so clearly it is worth repeating (yet again) that this is not true — **as shown by the very source Black uses to reference his claims!**

Somewhat ironically, **Anarchy** later ran a review of a book which detailed how some Italian individualist and anti-organisationalist anarchists became fascists. It’s conclusion? That the decisions of these few people has no relationship to their earlier politics, a conclusion somewhat at odds with usual position, expressed by Black, that the fact a few (Marxist!) syndicalists became fascists indicates the dubious nature of anarcho-syndicalism! Such is the nature of ideology!

I do consider the events in Italy in the 1920s quite important for radicals to learn from, and have written two lengthy pieces on it. As well as the above mentioned section of AFAQ, there is also a long (and critical) review of a book by the British Leninist SWP on the Arditi Del Popolo and resistance to fascism (which also had its aspects in Italian communities in America, which is why I posted my review of the Tresca biography. Suffice to say, although my interest in these events pre-dated Black’s **Anarchy After Leftism** (a book which makes some good points, some silly ones and some downright false, if not deliberately misleading, ones) I made a point of reading the Robert’s book. Unsurprisingly, what it actually said was distinctly at odds to what Black implied it did.

I also found it somewhat ironic that Black invoked Pannekoek’s (whom Black noted was a real scientist!) Lenin as Philosopher against Bookchin at one point on the question of objective reality with mentioning the awkward fact that on the question of whether an objective reality existed or not Bookchin and Pannekoek were at one! Opps! But, of course, for the ranks of “post-left anarchists” who have not read Pannekoek, that awkward fact would be unknown...

To be honest, I feel that there are better things to do than discuss the limitations of “Post-Left Anarchy”, although its supporters seem to think that attacking “left anarchists” is of the highest priority. Personally, I think that practice will determine who is right — if the “Post-Left” anarchists are right then their practice will show through (and I do **not** mean writing attacks of “left” anarchists in magazines or on-

line!), if we anarchists are right then we will grow in size and influence. And perhaps, ultimately, that later possibility is what drives the attacks on “left” anarchism?

Until I blog again, be seeing you!

Reply to Bob Black

I have to admit that I feel Comrade B is taking the piss in his letter. He claims that *“it is about war, not fascism”* and so his comments concerning the “syndicalists” are correct. Given that the pro-war syndicalists were the ones to become National Syndicalists and fascists, his point is lost on me. You would think that if the majority of syndicalists (i.e. members of the USI) in Italy had went over to fascism (and its “National Syndicalism”) then they would have supported the Nation in World War One. Given that the majority of USI members rejected the arguments of those syndicalists who were later to become fascists in 1914, I would humbly suggest that Comrade B’s argument does not hold water. If, as he says, *“syndicalism and nationalism (and then fascism) had been converging before the war”* then the majority of USI members (i.e. syndicalists) were not aware of this when they voted for a anti-war position (and so anti-nationalist) at the start of the First World War. Nor were the fascists when they attacked the USI after the war.

Strangely enough, the article *does* indicate that a majority of the USI rejected the pro-war syndicalists. As it said, “the majority did not even follow” the syndicalist “leaders” in supporting the war. Comrade B wonders *“what does this fiasco says about syndicalism”*? *I* have to wonder on what planet Comrade B is on. After all, the organisation voted in its **national congress** an anti-war position and the pro-war minority left it. Rather than being a *“self-refuting failure”* this example proves that it is Comrade B’s arguments which are self-refuting — and that he cannot even get basic facts right.

Moving on, Comrade B takes issue with the suggestion that he implied that syndicalists he mentions were anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists. Here he *is* taking the piss. After all, his comments are in a book about anarchism and the failings of “Leftist” anarchy. Now, call me naive, but in such a book you would think he would be discussing the failings of anarchists rather than “Leftists” (i.e. Marxists). Perhaps I am wrong, perhaps in order to refute anarcho-syndicalists you must discuss the failures of Marxist-syndicalists? What next, a refutation of communist anarchism by discussing the failures of Leninism?

Comrade B states that a *“modest but militant minority did put up a fight against fascism.”* In fact, the USI (which had grown from the 70 000 left after the pro-war faction left to nearly 1 million members) was the majority syndicalist organisation in the country (the pro-war, National Syndicalist Union UIL was a fraction of its size). It was USI members who took part in the Arditi Del Popolo. It was the USI which took part in the general strike against fascism. It was the USI which was crushed by

fascist gangs. And Comrade B still tries to claim that the *"Italian syndicalists mostly went over to fascism"*? Amazing.

He quotes another academic that by 1919 *"Italian nationalism and revolutionary syndicalism shared substantial similarities"*. Yes, but only if you look at the pro-war syndicalists who had left the USI years before! What did the USI stand for by 1919? It had taken an anti-war position, supported the class struggle (and so shattered "national" unity) and been a leading part in the strikes and occupations in the post-war period. For this the USI was attacked and crushed by the fascists. So much for "similarities" between the USI (i.e. revolutionary syndicalism) and Italian Nationalism (and so fascism).

Comrade B ends with a diatribe against "syndicalism" (including anarcho-syndicalism) and what they apparently believe in. I do not (and none of the anarcho-syndicalists I have met) subscribe to his list. Perhaps Comrade B confuses a desire to see the end of wage-labour by self-management with a glorification of work? If so, then that is his business. Personally, I agree with Kropotkin on the necessity of attractive "work" (i.e. productive activity) and reducing the hours we have to do this to a minimum. Every anarcho-syndicalist I have met shares this vision of work transformed into attractive, productive activity and minimised — and the first step towards this is occupying the workplace and placing it under self-management (where appropriate, of course, some workplaces should be turned into something more useful). I get the impression that Comrade B thinks that nobody reads his works, otherwise he would not suggest other anarchists glorify work and not be aware of the importance of his arguments in *"The Abolition of Work."* It is a shame he understates his influence in our movement so.

To conclude, Comrade B's claims that he is *"not referring to the official positions taken by one small organisation in 1915 or 1919, but rather to the ultimate trajectory of those . . . who had once considered themselves syndicalists."* As our article made clear, those who considered themselves "syndicalists" (and those David D. Roberts considered as such) were *not* anarcho-syndicalists — they considered themselves Marxists — and rather than being the majority of syndicalists (i.e. members, or even activists, of the USI) they were a small minority who had left the USI. If Comrade B wants to ignore these facts, then that is his business. Perhaps factual evidence is something else "post-leftist" anarchists reject?

Comrade A.

The Ted K Archive

Ian McKay

A few comments on Post-Left Anarchy

April 2, 2009

anarchism.pageabode.com/blog/a-few-comments-on-post-left-anarchy

www.thetedkarchive.com