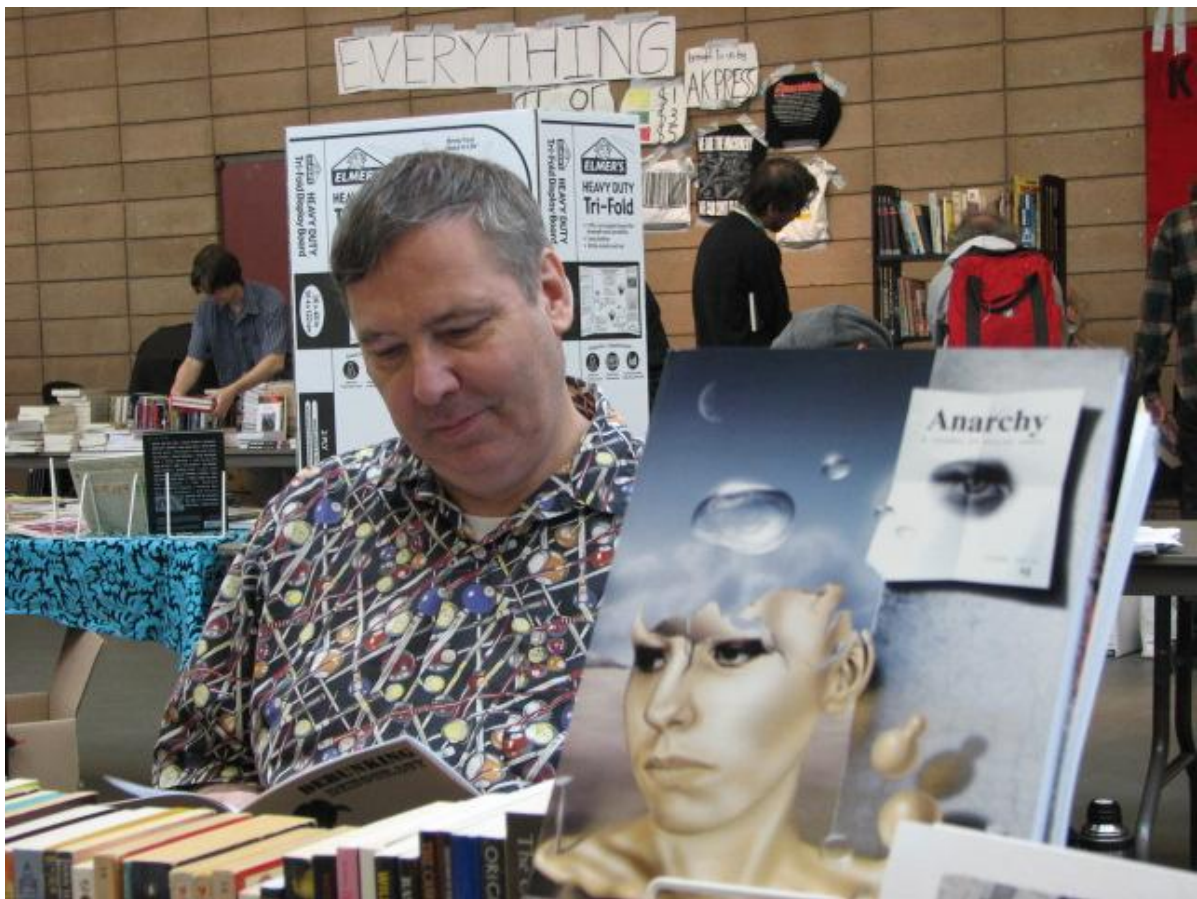


Interview With Bob Black

John Carico

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Bob Black (Robert Charles Black, Jr.) at the Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed” table, attending the 2011 Bay Area Anarchist Bookfair.

Washington, DC (TFC) – Bob Black is a post-left writer. His most famous work is “The Abolition of Work”. His newest book “Instead of Work” debuted on August 7th. He’s been described as one of America’s great modern Anarchists.

Give us a little background for those who may not be familiar with your work.

Bob Black

I’m the author of 5 (published) books: “The Abolition of Work and Other Essays” (1986), “Friendly Fire” (1992), “Beneath the Underground” (1994), “Anarchy after Leftism” (1987), and “Defacing the Currency: Selected Writings 1992-2012” (2013). The title essay “The Abolition of Work” remains, somewhat to my chagrin, my best-known text.

Why to your chagrin?

Bob Black:

“The Abolition of work is, I would say if asked, a luminous essay, deservedly popular. It’s just that I don’t want people to think that all I am is anti-work, when most of my writing before and since has dealt with other matters.”

What’s your definition of: anarchism? And how do you see such a society being implemented?

Bob Black

From my “Anarchy 101”: “Anarchism is the idea that the state (government) is unnecessary and harmful. Anarchy is society without government.” For a million years so, all human societies were anarchist. A few such societies still existed until very recently.

I don’t know. Many of what might be called the classical anarchists were involved with radical working-class movements in many countries (including Britain, France, Spain, Argentina, and the United States). Sometimes they called for armed rebellion, and when these happened, they participated. There was a short-lived period in the late 19th centuries when some anarchists, as individuals or in small groups, engaged in terrorism (the legendary ‘bomb-throwing anarchists’ beloved of journalists and politicians. The most popular idea, though, was the general strike.

“Do you think that if all unionized workplaces practiced labor agreements like minority unionism and members-only collective bargaining, it would promote an economy and a labor movement based on voluntary association and personal autonomy, and help fulfill the conditions necessary for a Union of Egoists?”

Bob Black

About unions: the short answer is: no. This is anarcho-syndicalism, the most antiquated of anarcho-left tendencies. In no country are most workplaces unionized, so, what they do isn’t going to revolutionize society. Also — your reference to a “Union of Egoists” will be obscure to most people. This was how Max Stirner in “The Ego and Its Own” contemplated social relations in an anarchist society (he didn’t call it that). He wasn’t talking about labor unions, and he was definitely rejecting all more or less permanent institutions.

In a fully-automated post-scarcity economy, would it ever be feasible or desirable to actively or formally prohibit people (or certain people) from working?

Bob Black

I oppose a “fully automated” society. High technology originated in capitalist enterprises, not only to increase profits, but to increase control over the workers. I consider naïve the idea that it all be just fine under new management (workers’ self-management, for instance). Although I’m not what is known as an “anarcho-primitivist,” nearly all anarchists have always believed that an anarchist society can only be a radically decentralized society, and its technology mostly doesn’t exist.

Prohibit people from working? What do you mean by work? Since my short definition of work is “forced labor” (there’s a longer, more specific one), it follows that

you can force people to work, but not to force them not to work, which is an absurd phrase.

Can you talk about your Views on Situationism and egoist communism?

Bob Black

I've been influenced by the situationists, as have others associated with what I call "post-left anarchism." But, because they clung to the idea that they were Marxists, the situationists fell afoul of contradictions. At times they, too, seem to call for the abolition of work, but more often they called for workers' control, generalized self-management. The latter I've called "self-managed servitude."

Egoism has only recently made some inroads into the thinking of some people who consider themselves anti-state communists (with a Marxist pedigree) and anarcho-communists. I know of no explicit formulation of it before the tract "The Right to Be Greedy" in 1973, which I later got reprinted, with my own preface.

Give how you would see a day to day life of a common society in your vision of a post work anarchist society?

Bob Black

Anarchists have always insisted that they have no blueprints for day to day life in an anarchist Society. It wouldn't have to be the same in all of them. It should always be grounded in local conditions. Principles like "direct action" and "mutual aid" are universally approved, but they are just that: principles, not rules. There should be few if any rules in my anarchist society. There are, however, utopian or anarchist writers (Kropotkin, Fourier, William Morris) whom I have found inspiring.

You consider democracy a form of hierarchy of the masses. Is consensus a practical alternative you'd prefer?

Bob Black

I consider democracy to be a form of government, and as such, I am necessarily against it. Democracy as a form of collective decision-making — which means, I take it, majority-rule voting — isn't anarchist. Consensus is fine if it can be accomplished. In a decentralized society of face to face groups, it is feasible some of the time, but, I don't insist on it. Errico Malatesta, my favorite classical anarchist, has discussed this. Decisions which occasion serious ongoing opposition may be reconsidered. Where disagreement persists, it may be that the majority and the minority can confine the majority preference to those who prefer it. It may be that the minority can be "compensated" by other decisions in its favor. If all else fails, there 's secession. The Occupy movement has shown that there are many possibilities between consensus and majority rule.

Can you give some examples of productive play?

Bob Black

Crafts, gardening, writing . . .

What can young anarchists and radicals do right now to bring about real productive changes to society? Some get trapped in conspiracy, and this often leads to paranoia and a sense of powerlessness? How do we counter this along with the divisiveness of many leftist groups, in order to form a true opposition to ecocide and capitalism? Is the work of the earth liberation front something you'd be in agreeance with?

Bob Black

I see little conspiracy, but of course, that's the point of conspiracy. If your question is how anarchists should relate to various leftist groups, that's not a problem for me, in my isolation, but you might better ask some of my Bay Area friends. Some groups such as the RCP should be shunned.

I am not much of a strategist, much less a tactician. I have grown old, and it's not appropriate for me to tell the people who go out into the streets what to do there.

I think that an interesting feature of serious opposition in the last 20 years and more, is that is "anarchistic." I am thinking of the early anti-globalization protests and more recently, Occupy. Anarchists were the heart and soul of those movements. They invented Occupy. But, they didn't insist that everybody adopt the anarchist label. Let them be anarchists in practice and maybe then they will learn the theory and see that it's for them. I would be perfectly happy with an anarchist revolution that called itself something else.

Who is the RCP? I find a lot of thinking people end up stuck in Alex Jones, Jesse Ventura, or Zechariah Sitchen or even discordian philosophy, or perhaps going nihilist, what would you say to inspire activists and thinkers that we do have power to make real change?

Bob Black

Revolutionary Communist Party. Another Maoist cult to shun is MIM.

Is this like Bob Avakian?

Bob Black

Yes, that's the one.

The RCP still has some presence in the Bay Area, where it originated, but hopefully nowhere else.the Workers World Party. You should read David Graeber's book on Occupy.

I would like to! I read Chomskys. Speaking of which You have an article called "Chomsky on the Nod" in which you criticize Chomsky, can you give a shorty synopsis on what you consider your strongest critiques?

Bob Black

A short synopsis of 116 pages? No. I offered a critique of Chomsky's philosophy of language, his beliefs in objective natural law and human rights, and his anarchism (I don't think he is one). It all seems pretty strong to me. I have seen no rejoinders.

I'd definitely recommend it for anyone who, like myself, used to be a full on chomskyite. I guess if you have any recommendations on activist groups or artists to check out that'd be cool.

Bob Black

The text got to be so long because I worked back from some of Chomsky's political views, to his ideas of human nature, and natural law/rights, and then his supposed anarchism. Many people see a sharp divide between his philosophy of language and, for instance, his espousal of anarcho-syndicalism, but, I saw connections and tried to bring them out.

I have nothing to do with activist artists or groups. I don't get out much.

Anything else you'd like to say to the readers about yourself or your beliefs? Any readings you'd recommend?

Bob Black

Generally I've resisted providing reading lists. My footnotes contain a lot of references. In "Defacing the Currency" there appears a short anti-work bibliography.

Major themes of my writing in relatively recent years have been: (1) the critique of the left, and (2) dispute resolution in anarchist societies. Some of that is in the latest book, more is at The Anarchist Library.

The reason the second matter interests me is that, for most people, the great objection to anarchism is, but what to do about predatory criminals? The traditional answers (with no private property, why steal? and therapy and lovingkindness for bad guys, or —this one is REALLY stupid — the state is the REAL criminal) are blatantly inadequate. I seem to be the first anarchist to take these matters seriously, although Malatesta at least pointed out that the anarchist stories are unconvincing here.

Any advice for young political writers?

Bob Black

Don't follow my example.

So the big question remains: how do we get from here to there?. Here being rampant yet propagandized fascism, there being full anarchism .

Bob Black

I think just a big a question is where "there" is. The social democrats didn't know. The Marxist-Leninists didn't know. Eventually they didn't even care.

Interesting. So where in your estimation is there?

Bob Black

Utopia

And is utopia possible? Crimethinc says we must learn to paint using the medium of desire.

Bob Black

Crimethinc is Bob Black Lite.

What do you think of groups like DGR and ELF and Earth First ?

Bob Black

I don't think much about — or of — groups. Because of circumstances and, no doubt, temperament, I have almost no experience of involvement in political groups. I'm expressed my aversion to the typical leftist organization: a formal, recruitment-oriented, membership organization with officers and delegates, a publication, and a doctrinaire official program. From time to time, and usually at any given time, there are one or more of these organizations which — improbably — identify themselves as anarchist. Generally they claim as selling points their coherence, continuity, and solidarity, as opposed to the evanescent whimsies of unorganized “individualist” and “lifestyle” anarchists. Yet the leftist organizations are always faction-ridden, prone to expulsions and schisms, and none of the anarcho-leftist organizations of the last half century has lasted nearly as long as several post-left publishing projects. There is nothing more divisive than an insistence on unity.

Has the Hogshire incident has changed the way you go about your work, and if you could comment on the use of State in that event?

Bob Black

No, but it certainly isolated me, even aside from the death threat postcards that Hogshire mailed me on his transcontinental travels, alienating everybody he stayed with. My anger at this virtual lynching provided the energy for my book “Anarchy after Leftism.” I took out my anger at Hogshire and, especially, his fellow travellers, on Murray Bookchin. I first offered this book to Autonomedia. As I told them — in person, at one of their “joke ‘n toke” sessions — Bookchin's ravings against “lifestyle anarchism” are more than anything else, an attack on you. Explicitly, in the case of Hakim Bey — who (I later heard) was the main opponent of Autonomedia publishing it, because he has no balls, and he was afraid of the fallout from the Hogshire incident. In subsequent years, there have also been, for general reasons, fewer places I could be published.

So what inspired you to study radical politics in the first place? Do you see art as relevant to political movements?

Bob Black

I was a political radical before I studied radical politics much. But in the early 70's, I became dissatisfied with the New Left (by then dwindling and degenerated), and then I did search out radical but anti-authoritarian alternatives. I was a student at the University of Michigan. My formal schooling instructed me on European social movements, but not radical theories (or ideologies: it depends whether you like them or not). I had access, in the Graduate Library, to the Labadie Collection — founded by anarchist Joe Labadie — one of the two largest archives of anarchist, labor and

radical materials in the world (the other is the International Museum of Social History in Amsterdam). So I read the anarchists, libertarian socialists (including such obscure tendencies as guild socialism), syndicalists and council communists. Soon, situationist materials were being republished by Black & Red in Detroit or self-published by pro-situationist groups in the San Francisco area. In 1975 the Fifth Estate, the oldest or second oldest underground newspaper, went anarchist, and it exposed me to the latest French fashions (Foucault, Baudrillard, etc.) among other delectables.

The Ted K Archive

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