Bob Black
The Anti-Anarchist Conspiracy: An Empirical Test
1989

Retrieved on October 5th, 2009 from www.spunk.org
(From Beneath the Underground. A case study in just how stupid a lot of old-fashioned anarcho-fulmination really is if you take the trouble to read it at all critically.)

theanarchistlibrary.org

The Anti-Anarchist Conspiracy: An Empirical Test

Bob Black

1989

There are many proffered explanations for the oblivion into which anarchism in America (and almost everywhere else) descended after the First World War. The anarchists favor those that blame their enemies, especially the state, instead of themselves. It is certain, however, that state repression cannot completely explain the anarchist collapse and cannot begin to explain — what is more important — the anarchist inability to bound back in times of tolerance. Taking the long view, we are in a relatively tolerant time now, yet it is gay artists, rap groups, punk and heavy metal bands — not the anarchist media — which are fighting off censorship. Despite a modest resurgence in the 70's and again in the 80's, the anarchists remain, not only insignificant, but invisible — in contrast to their (albeit lurid) visibility in Victorian America.

Undeniably the anarchists were brutally crushed during and after the war to end all wars, their leaders imprisoned or deported, a number of their activists murdered or lynched, their presses shut down and the mails closed to them. The rest of the left met with the same fate, yet the Socialists recovered a much diminished place

and the Communists went on to claim a modicum of influence in the 30's. The CP even stole the anarchists' own martyrs Sacco and Vanzetti, concealing the ideology they died for by casting them as generic progressive victims. The unofficially anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World took a bad beating from the state, but it was the defection of many of its members to Communism by 1924 which reduced this once-feared organization to a social club for aging leftists (more recently, for white college students with rich parents). When it ceased to be a union, the IWW ceased to be what it aspired and claimed to be, and effectively ceased to be at all.

There is simply no basis in fact for the self-serving, self-pitying anarchist line that this noble doctrine has failed to enlist the millions whose interests it serves because it has been concealed and maligned by the ideological apparatus of the state. Hardly a man is now alive who recalls the time when the cry of anarchy struck terror in the bourgeois bosom. Anarchism is not omitted from the curriculum because it is dangerous. It is omitted because, like Theosophy, Georgism and Anti-Masonry, it is not important enough to be included. Historically the most important thing any American anarchist ever did was assassinate President McKinley, thus inaugurating Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive period — an important but by no means anarchist consequence. Anarchists got plenty of publicity back then. If most of it was bad, nonetheless this bad publicity — concerning the Haymarket anarchists, for instance — attracted to the movement many of the leading lights (such as Voltairine de Cleyre) who gave anarchism such intellectual distinction as it enjoyed in *fin de siecle* America, the Golden Age of American anarchism.

When I was in junior high school, in the 60's, we were assigned Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience." Spontaneously and as one the students (I was probably one of them) rose up — this was in a public school in a middle-class liberal suburb — to denounce Thoreau's anarchist madness. The teacher didn't train us to react that way. It

to be the last to exploit the technological "progress" they are the last anarchists to believe in.

Again, the foregoing is not the complete explanation for the anarchist demise which, I admit, eludes me. Consider it, instead, as a prolegomenon to any future analysis which wades in bathos. As Ken Knabb says: "Be cruel to your past and those who would keep you there." Again: defeat is the *default position* for a revolutionary movement and still more so for a revolutionary transvaluation of values. Our side lost because the other side won. Beyond this useless tautology we are not very far along in understanding our debacle. The anarchists increase their relative power — and all power is relative — insofar as they identify and *dispense with* disabling illusions and self-delusions and grapple with the real forces arrayed against them, or rather, the real forces they are arrayed against.

(Too many) anarchists are — if not the worst — the *first* enemies of anarchy. This enemy at least the anarchists lack not the power, only the will, to defeat.

of a thought-experiment (which others are welcome to replicate), my card catalog excursion does dramatize a point of some small interest.

Before leaving the library, let's consider what might be done if affairs are as Kolhoff depicts them. Instead of bewailing our martyrdom, why not take *direct action* and donate books to libraries as I donated mine? I'll send my book *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays* at cost — for me, $4.00 — to any American library Kolhoff, or anybody, designates. (Or to any foreign library, but enclose several more dollars for postage.) I first made this offer in *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, a fine magazine which then had a circulation of 5,000. How many takers did I have? *Two*. Guess who wasn't one of them?

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Empire, some Western anarchists (myself included) are mailing their literature to their resurgent but embattled comrades in Eastern Europe. Well and good. But why not *also* send it, at much lesser expense, to the small towns, the totalitarian horrowshows in Utah or Orange County or the Bible Belt? We can probably do more for peace and freedom in the world right here, on our own turf, than by exporting ideology to the rest of the world which has perhaps had its fill of our imperial outreach offerings.

Anarchists have always placed great stock on print media — Proudhon is not the only anarchist typesetter — but in the electronic age their traditional technology, like their traditional ideology, is at risk of anachronism. If Joe Average lives within radio range of such cities as New York, Chicago and Detroit (I am sure there are many more) he has access to audio anarchy. It's even been available, at times, in upstate New York on stations in Woodstock and Troy. And if Joe is a techie he can interface with anarchism on computer bulletin boards such as Rick Harrison's *The Alembic*. I am no high-tech enthusiast myself, but it's curious that the syndicalists and other conservatives who buy into industrialism, compulsory work, and the self-management of business-as-usual look

came naturally to adolescents habituated to hierarchy by schooling and the family, even if (as was the case) they believed in civil rights and soon smoked pot and opposed the Vietnam War. The teacher had to play Devil's — that is, Thoreau's — Advocate as no student would. Now Thoreau's essay is as good an introduction to constructive anarchism as any. He is no revolutionary. He has the added advantages of being a native-born Yankee, not an immigrant and/or Jew, and enjoying consecration by the curriculum as a classic American author. He does not even use the stigmatizing word "anarchism." If he met with unanimous dismissal it is because his ideas were unpopular. They still are.

Anarchist ideologues propound still sillier explanations for their impotence. Chaz Bufe, for instance, blames "fashion anarchists" for the enduring unpopularity of a doctrine which was unfashionable long before teenagers adorned their black leather jackets with circle-A's. Rather, these punks are a main source of recent recruits to the anarchist ranks. If (as charged) their acquaintance with anarchist tradition is scanty that is perhaps a point in their favor. The ignorant can learn. The deluded hoe the harder row of miseducation. If anarchist fathers like the goofy Bufe really mean to dictate a *dress code* to youths attracted to anarchism they will be received, as well they should, like the high school principles these kids have had quite enough of already. Better fashion anarchists than fascist anarchists.

Insofar as anarchism is genuinely revolutionary it would be its success, not its failure, that needed explaining. That would explain, up to a point, why Marxism prevailed over anarchism for so long. Its rejection of the existing order is much more superficial and it is correspondingly more elastic in adjusting to the status quo. When it assumed power it was predisposed to assimilate bureaucrats, managers and military officers into its own apparatus since it had no objection to their functions and was only concerned with their loyalties. The temporary anarchist success in Spain proves the point. The anarcho-syndicalist leaders joined the government

even as the militants enforced labor discipline and sacrifice on the shop floor and in the fields. Only the Fascist victory saved the anarchists from exposure of their counter-revolutionary coercion of a decidedly refractory working class.

A few years ago, anarcho-syndicalist Michael Kolhoff issued a "Call" for an official, authoritative North American anarchist organization in which he undoubtedly expected a post. At the 1989 anarchist gathering (or *blathering*) in San Francisco, those attending overwhelmingly rejected the proposal, as American anarchists always have. It was not so much a considered anti-organizational position (although not a few people had reflectively arrived at one) as an instinctive recoil from control. It may well have been the single most widely shared opinion at the event. The organizers were just too blatantly power-hungry schemers. Even the fashion anarchists steered clear of the proto-officialdom.

Why then *is* the revealed truth of anarchism disbelieved by almost all and sundry? For, I'm sure, more reasons than I can think of. For now it is something, anyway, to dispell the illusions of the true believers. Kolhoff indignates that the average working-class Joe requires nothing but a little anarchist propaganda to bring him around. The supporting argument is flimsy. According to Kolhoff, the incipient anarchist, turning to the local library for guidance, would find nothing but "lies" about anarchism. So *that's* the secret source of anarchist insignificance!

I put this claim to the test of fact, as Kolhoff, a positivist, would want me to, I'm sure. I perused the heading "Anarchists & Anarchism" in the card catalog of the Albany (New York) Public Library. Albany is an old, economically stagnant city with a declining population of less than 100,000. Joe Average probably lives in a larger, more prosperous city with a bigger, better library (a friend of mine who works there assails its mediocrity). What would one learn of anarchism there?

I did discover books which a doctrinaire like Kolhoff would consider, in some cases correctly, to tell lies about anarchism. But I

discovered many more books which espoused anarchism or examined it with sympathy and relative accuracy. These include three titles by Michael Bakunin, one by Giovanni Baldelli, five by Murray Bookchin, two by Emma Goldman, two by Peter Kropotkin, one by John M. Hart, one by David de Leon, and three on explicitly anarchist subjects by historian Paul Avrich, plus two more of related interest (*Kronstadt 1921* and *Russian Rebels, 1600–1800*). Most North American anarchists have probably not read 19 books on anarchism. I have, but I haven't read even half the ones in my local library.

Moreover, the subject heading seriously understates the anarchist presence on the shelves. Thoreau does not appear there, nor do various historical and cultural studies by sometime anarchists like Paul Goodman, George Woodcock and Herbert Read. Kolhoff will perhaps be relieved to learn that my book *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays* is assigned another, essentially useless heading (in effect, "Misscelaneous"). And that one, I'm fairly certain, wouldn't be there at all if I weren't local and if I hadn't donated the copy myself. But what about all the others?

One might well come up with a more comprehensive and representative selection of books on anarchism. (Although no two anarchists are likely to agree on that selection.) The point is that Kolhoff's imaginary playmate Joe Average can easily learn a lot more about anarchism than some anarchists, perhaps, would like him to, even in the local library. And if Joe is really Average he has what the survey researchers call "Some College" where he had access to what was probably a much better collection relating to anarchism. And there is always inter-library loan. The problem is maybe that Joe doesn't use the library at all, or uses it for movie videos and junk fiction, not that it denies him the anarchist verbiage he supposedly craves.

I may be taxed for taking the library lament literally — but I don't know how *else* to take the complaints of ideologues otherwise innocent of irony, metaphor and humor. As an "as if" sort