

COMMENTARY AND REVIEW ESSAYS

ANARCHISM FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE:
TWO RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO
ANARCHIST STUDIES*Nathan Jun*

Franks, Benjamin. *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms*. Oakland, CA and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2006. 240 pp. \$19.95/£15.00 (paperback).

Asimakopoulou, John, Nocella, Anthony, and Shannon, Deric, eds. *The Accumulation of Freedom: Writings on Anarchist Economics*. Oakland, CA and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2012. 320 pp. \$21.00 (paperback).

A critical mass of theoretical writing produced in the contemporary anarchist studies milieu has focused on the intersection of anarchism and poststructuralism. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the theoretical underpinnings of classical anarcho-communism and the modern “class-struggle” movements, which are, in many respects, its heirs. *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary Anarchisms* and *The Accumulation of Freedom* are two books that seek to remedy this oversight, each in its own way.

According to its author, *Rebel Alliances* is a labor of love (and rage) fifteen years in the making. Originally begun in 1991, it was not until a few years later that Benjamin Franks set about writing the book in earnest. Although he initially intended to open “with a detailed account of the numerous anti-globalisation protests,” Franks scrapped this plan for fear of “ignoring the other manifestations of anarchist activity and also subsuming the other currents in the anti-capitalist movement that are antipathetic to anarchism into the libertarian fold” (10–11). The final product—a meticulously researched and carefully analyzed study of British anarchism—does not disappoint. Indeed, one wonders whether such an ambitious but successful book could possibly have been completed in less than fifteen years. In just over 350 pages, Franks provides not only a concise and well-documented history of the British anarchist movement but also a cogent and insightful exploration of anarchist theory and praxis. The fact that

both parts of the book are by all accounts equally well done is a testament to Franks's interdisciplinary acumen.

At the level of scholarship, Franks's brief history of British anarchism in the first chapter compares favorably to Avrich's *The Russian Anarchists*, Goyen's *Beer and Revolution*, Pernicone's *Italian Anarchism*,¹ and other book-length histories of national anarchist movements. What he foregoes in the way of length and detail he more than compensates for in the quality of his research. Anyone familiar with anarchist publications knows that print runs are small and back issues are often impossible to find. I, for one, am impressed by the sheer number of relatively rare to outright obscure newspapers, magazines, and other publications Franks managed to dig up in the course of his research, not to speak of how skillfully he uses them as historical sources. The main focus of the book is "class-struggle anarchism," which Franks defines in terms of "rejection of capitalism and the market economy . . . an egalitarian concern for the interests and freedoms of others as part of creating non-hierarchical social relations . . . a complete rejection of state power and other quasi-state mediating forces . . . [and] a recognition that means have to prefigure ends" (12–13). As Franks's historical overview makes clear, however, class-struggle anarchists have always been keen to form "rebel alliances" with other radical groups (environmental, feminist, antiracist, etc.) with whom they share certain basic commitments. Anarchism's theoretical openness and pliancy, he thinks, has also been one of its greatest strengths.

The four remaining chapters concern ethics, agents of change, organization, and tactics, respectively. Franks's analysis of these topics itself turns on two more fundamental theses. The first is that anarchism is best understood as an *ethical* commitment—and indeed, Franks's discussion of the anarchist ethical framework in chapter two is one of the clearest and most engaging sections of the book. That framework, he argues, is the "prefigurative method"—that is, "the consideration of whether libertarian methods are 1) consistent with the type of agency they wish to appeal to and 2) the aims they wish to achieve" (97). Simply put, anarchist ethics demands that the means employed be consistent with the desired ends. Unlike Leninism and other purely strategic political philosophies, anarchism does not countenance the use of oppressive tactics in the pursuit of liberatory goals. Ethical prefiguration provides anarchists with a reliable "moral compass" in planning and carrying out political interventions; more so than anything else, Franks argues, this is what distinguishes anarchism from other radical movements. The second thesis is that the prefigurative ethic is consistent with "postanarchism"—that is, anarchism as reinterpreted via the insights of poststructuralist philosophy.

Franks's analysis of prefiguration is exceptionally subtle and is without a doubt one of the finest achievements of the book. His discussion of "postanarchism," on the other hand, leaves a bit—and I emphasize a bit—to be desired. In the first place, I am not sure that Franks ever really explains what he means by "postanarchism." At times, he seems to have in mind the "poststructuralist anarchism" of Todd May and even intimates as much (17). Yet it is not at all clear that class-struggle anarchism, as Franks has defined it, has much of anything in common with May's poststructuralist anarchism. The latter is defined in terms

of a categorical rejection of “representing others to themselves.” Franks claims that the first three elements of class-struggle anarchism (viz., rejection of capitalism, rejection of the state, and egalitarianism) are basically affirming the same thing. Perhaps they are, but I fail to notice any real argument to that effect. Also, even if the rejection of capitalism and the rejection of representation are in some way analogous, it does not follow that class-struggle anarchism and postanarchism are analogous. After all, the rejection of capitalism in the former and the rejection of representation in the latter might be—and, I would argue, are—following from very different premises.

In the end, I am not entirely sure what Franks is trying to say about postanarchism. Fortunately, it seems to matter very little as concerns his overall project. If the point is to make room for diversity within the contemporary anarchist family, he does an excellent job of widening the scope of anarchism in his analysis of prefiguration. Whether postanarchism is truly an anarchism will depend crucially on whether it is a politics that requires consistency between means and ends. If Franks is right—and I think he is—this is the genuine *differentium* of anarchism, and we should applaud him for so deftly bringing it to our attention in this book.

The Accumulation of Freedom presents a much more ambitious project than does *Rebel Alliances*—namely, to articulate a distinctively “anarchist” approach to economics that can hold up under critical scrutiny. As the editors note, such a project is necessary precisely because anarchism has been written out of the history of economic theory (13–14). Even among many anarchists, the assumption has long been that classical anarchism assumes a basically Marxian economic framework to which it contributes little or nothing of its own. Part 1 of the book (“History”) does an especially good job of challenging this assumption. Chris Spannos and Iain McKay each make a convincing case that anarchist economic thought predates and, indeed, has a formative influence on Marx. McKay, in particular, traces the origins of anarchism as a “named socio-economic theory” to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (64). Part 1 dovetails very nicely with Part 3 (“Critique”), where learned analysis from John Asimakopoulou, Robin Hahnel, and the Armalines demonstrates the ongoing existence and relevance of anarchist economic thought.

Part 2 (“Analysis”) pivots to discussions of the contemporary situation in order to assess the relevance of anarchist economics in the twenty-first century. In the opening article, sociologists Abbey Volcano and Deric Shannon offer a sweeping but very effective overview of late capitalism. “. . . [Even] in broad strokes,” they write, “one can see how the features of capitalism have historically changed—now in its current neoliberal globalized form and perhaps morphing into some newly emerging form post-crisis. Even if we took a fairly small slice of history, this is not too difficult to demonstrate” (80). Having identified the enemy, the next two chapters discuss ways of resisting and opposing it. In “Fight to Win!” Canadian activists Jeff Monaghan and D.T. Cochrane examine the theory and practice of “political-economic disruption campaigns” (96). In the Colin Wardesque “Rereading Western Economies,” Richard J. White and Colin C. Williams

challenge “the widely held belief that we exist in a ‘capitalist’ world” (117) by analyzing ordinary economic practices that exist outside of capitalist hegemony.

Parts 4 (“Practice”) and 5 (“Resistance”) are concerned with anarchist praxis in the form of alternative economics and anticapitalist resistance, respectively. As both of these themes were introduced in Part 2, their subsequent reintroduction comes across as somewhat clumsy. Fortunately, this does not diminish the quality of the chapters contained therein. Taken together, Uri Gordon’s and Caroline Kaltefleiter’s essays offer a comprehensive overview of contemporary anarchist economic practices, while Marie Trigona’s and Ernesto Aguilar’s discussions of anticapitalist movements in the Third World and among people of color offer a helpful balance to Monaghan’s and Cochrane’s discussion.

The most interesting and thought-provoking section of the book is Part 6 (“Visions”), which takes up the question of what an anarchist economy might look like. This is a touchy subject for anarchists, who have traditionally been leery about utopian blueprints. Instead, general economic theories such as mutualism, communism, and the like have been articulated on the understanding that implementation will largely be a matter of practical experimentation. The three chapters in this section—to wit, a critique of mutualism, a defense of libertarian communism, and an explication of the experimental “anarchist method” just mentioned—are written very much in this spirit. Of these, the most fascinating is Wayne Price’s essay, which argues—with Malatesta—that an anarchist economy must be flexible, nondogmatic, and open to a variety of strategies and possible solutions (316–17).

As I suggested earlier, there are times when the division of chapters seems arbitrary and forced. While this is surely a weakness, I recognize the difficulty of imposing textual order on a volume with such a sweeping and ambitious goal—one that, notably, *The Accumulation of Freedom* actually achieves. One cannot read this book and continue to believe in the false dichotomy between capitalism and state socialism. It makes good on its promise to vindicate the overlooked tradition of anarchist economics.

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Note

1. Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2005); Tom Goyens, *Beer and Revolution: The German Anarchist Movement in New York City, 1880–1914* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Nunzio Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism 1864–1892* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009).

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