

Lawrence Jarach

That Aside, A Valuable Service

2007

Reviewed by Lawrence Jarach
Anarchism: A Beginner's Guide
by Ruth Kinna
Oneworld Publications, 2005
180 pages. Paper. \$16.95

It is certainly a difficult – if not daunting – task to try to write an introductory text about anarchism that is at the same time positive, broad, subtle, contextualized, detailed, *and short*. Judging from the relative sizes of other Beginner's Guides in the series, I presume that co-editor of *Anarchist Studies* and Professor of Politics Ruth Kinna was given a page limit. This seriously compromises any author's ability to be as comprehensive as she might like, and Kinna's work suffers from that constraint. There are plenty of mistakes in this short analytical survey; some stem from the fact that Kinna is writing from England while many of the topics she covers occur in the United States; others derive from what appear to be her prejudices about what she believes anarchism should be.

Before I go into the difficulties and specific problems that exist in the text, let me say that the weekly anarchist study group that I'm part of has read the entire book and it has generated the most engaging discussions we've had in a while. As a group of non-academic long-time anarchist activists and writers, it is an interesting exercise to read and talk about an academic introduction. By writing this book, Kinna has provided a valuable service to anyone curious about anarchism and anarchists, from newbies to those of us who've been doing it for a few years.

A couple of points in Kinna's favor are the many chapter- ending suggestions for further reading and her use of charts, an added way of getting her analysis across (although not all of them are equally useful). By charting individual perspectives she shows the similarities among various philosophers of anarchism, from the classical 19th century dead guys with beards to the more easily recognized moderns (Black, Perlman, Bookchin, Zerzan), by comparing and contrasting them. For a person just starting to get interested in this anarchy stuff, it's helpful to make that continuity explicit.

Half of the book consists of exploring the history of the idea of anarchism, both as a legitimate political philosophy in its own right, and as an explicitly anti-government political philosophy (chapters one, two, and three). In the final chapter Kinna presents a survey of tactics and strategies for change that exist in the anarchist toolbox. The second chapter covers the various anarchist arguments for rejecting the state, which Kinna (echoing some anarchists) separates completely from the practice of government. This issue is one that has caused plenty of undue confusion about anarchism – both from anarchists as well as from those who

are skeptical or hostile. For many anarchists who are not students (or graduate students, or professors), disentangling the institutions of statecraft and government is uninteresting and irrelevant. Perhaps I lack the requisite subtlety of mind to be able to distinguish between them readily. Kinna states, “For the most part, anarchist theories indicate that some forms of government, authority and power can be legitimated. What they deny is that these legitimate forms can flourish in the state” (67). I hardly know where to begin to take on such a statement. Suffice to say that I find it extremely objectionable.

For the political science major (or graduate student, or professor), the question of the legitimacy of particular forms of government is the foundational question of their chosen field of study. The examination of the ways political systems operate (whether more or less authoritarian, centralized, reliant on covert or overt repression, etc) is what interests them. For those of us not trained in — or not interested in — picking apart such details, it matters little which systems or institutions operate in a given nation-state. Political scientists are among those who insist, for example, that there’s a whole lot more than a dime’s worth of difference between Clinton and Bush — because there are questions of divergent political philosophies that are meaningful and result in discrete policies. For many anarchists (myself included), these differences are wildly exaggerated, more imaginary (in the Spectacular-Commodity sense) than real.

Another distraction is her inclusion of the writings of Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard in this survey, probably out of concern for some kind of balance of anti- and pro-capitalist perspectives. Libertarians are right wing, pro-private property, pro-hierarchy, and they like cops (as long as the cops are organized in private security gangs), and in fact like the state and government — so long as these institutions don’t interfere with what the Libertarians consider to be legitimate business practices. Almost every anarchist worth her salt knows that the milieu of these so-called anti-governmentalists is overpopulated with rich Republicans who want to get high and not pay taxes.

While it is definitely gratifying to be noticed in a decent anarchist book, it is equally disappointing to be misunderstood. If Kinna had taken a look at previous issues of *Anarchy*, she almost certainly would not have made the error of calling me a primitivist:

For primitivists, liberal rationality expresses a faulty approach towards reality: one that asserts the superiority of the intellect over sense and feeling. For postmoderns it represents a mistaken idea of truth and reality: neither intellect nor feeling can capture either, there are only diverse and multiple interpretations. Yet both groups are hostile to the scientific, rationalist tradition that has dominated anarchist thought. Lawrence Jarach’s primitivist

critique of Chaz Bufe’s “ultra-rationalist and moralist perspective” and his “liberal leftist” commitment to “civil liberties” is one example of the recent trend. (37)

My criticisms of Bufe, including of *his* liberal leftism because of his adherence to civil liberties, go back twenty years, before there was a tendency identifiable as primitivism, and the particular piece she cites was written outside the realm of primitivism as well — it just happened to be picked up and posted on a primitivist website. Another failing is Kinna’s conflation of primitivism and/or postmodernism with any and all criticisms of the classical 19th century anarchist adherence to rationalism and positivism. She places Bob Black squarely in the primitivist camp despite his never having accepted that label, and she clearly missed my essay “Why Primitivism (without adjectives) Makes Me Nervous” (now translated into several languages), which includes my explicit rejection of the label for myself as well as an analysis of what I consider the manifold pitfalls of primitivism in general. I can’t fault her for not reading something I wrote — except for the fact that our respective journals are regularly exchanged.

There are two places in particular where either Kinna and/or her editor are careless or clueless; the non-American context of the research and publication are at least partly to blame. On page 110 Kinna refers to the “International Workers of the World” [sic]. Certainly she is not the first writer (anarchist, anarchist-positive, or not) to make this error, and because the Wobblies have not had much influence in England it is likely that Kinna (and her editor) have had no contact with actual Wobs, but really, how much sense does this incorrect appellation make on its own? “International” and “World” in the same organizational name? One needn’t be a terribly scrupulous and detail-oriented editor to find such a redundant possibility problematic — if not completely absurd. Then on page 145 she brings up Paul Goodman’s plan for reconfiguring the island of “Manhattan” [sic].

Kinna’s separation from an American context shows up again when she discusses Jo Freeman’s horrid paean to hierarchy, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*. She refers to it as a “critique of anarcha-feminism” (114) regardless of the fact that there was no significant anarcha-feminist tendency to speak of in 1970. Freeman was merely questioning the relevance of consciousness-raising groups for feminists in (what Freeman correctly perceived as) their search for inclusion in bourgeois politics; she had determined that such small, informal, local groups were not relevant to the pursuit of political power. Freeman argued instead for a centralized and hierarchical organization; once Freeman threw in her lot with the left-wing of the Democratic Party, she abandoned all pretense to radicality, but that would happen after there were explicit anarcha-feminist responses to her screed — including *The Tyranny of Tyranny*.

Another confusion of chronology jumps out at the reader in the final chapter, “Strategies for Change”:

To the distress of anarchists like Guerin [sic], the Bonnot Gang (usually credited with having thought of the idea of the getaway car before Bonnie and Clyde) firmly linked French anarchism to banditry. (150)

Firstly, Guerin, an adequate historian of European anarchism, referred to himself as a “libertarian socialist,” not an anarchist — a distinction *he* was careful to maintain. This is a slight quibble next to the juxtaposition of Bonnot with Bonnie and Clyde. The first use of a getaway car in the course of a bank robbery is indisputably that of Bonnot, in December 1911, almost twenty years before Clyde even met Bonnie. And while Bonnie and Clyde were portrayed in film as semi-populist avengers of the poor rather than as ordinary criminals, it remains a fact that almost all the French anarchist press was funded by the pelf netted by the “Bonnot Gang” during the time they flourished. Guerin (and others) can be as distressed as they like, but anarchism, because it is against government, will continue to be against the law whether or not any particular anarchist decides to engage in deliberately illegal activities on a regular basis.

The most difficult aspect of the book, however, is Kinna’s discussion of violence and terrorism. One would think, especially in these days of the knee-jerk application of such terms to any and all forms of dissidence, that someone with scholarly credentials would be more careful and precise with such terms. Unfortunately this is not the case. Her first attempt (two pages before the subsection titled “anarchism and violence”) to define — or at least characterize — violence is in relation to the infamous Black Bloc,

a loosely organized black-clad cluster of affinity groups and individuals, distinguished by their commitment to violence — as a means to resist arrest, assist in ‘un-arrests’, break police lines and meet state violence head-on . . . Elements within the Black Bloc are also committed to property damage . . . [and] the indiscriminate destruction of . . . public buildings and utilities. (156)

I hope I’m not the only anarchist to understand resisting arrest and otherwise refusing to cooperate with cops as self-defense rather than as acts of aggression.

In terms of attacks on property (corporate or “public” — which really means *government-owned*), Kinna makes no effort to deal with the context of property as an institution given supreme value under capitalism. Creating a fetish for and monopoly on private (and corporate, and government) property and enforcing that monopoly of ownership — indeed, the very concept of ownership needs to be

critically examined as well – is part of the tautological web of state violence that serves to maintain itself with the justification of protecting that very property. Kinna seems to assume (in the absence of any statement in the book to the contrary) the neutrality of the existence of property, and so by extension seems to accept the definition of “violence” to include acts of vandalism and property destruction. This is unfortunate, but is *almost* mitigated by a very conditional statement at the end of the last chapter:

if violence is considered to be purposeful.. .the question anarchists should ask themselves is not whether they should be prepared to use aggression against the state and civilization, but how and when they should do so. (163)

Such a statement can be interpreted as support for the necessity of “aggression” and at the same time a condemnation of it. Removing a couple of word choice considerations from it (what does it mean for violence to be “purposeful”? what is the purpose of using “aggression” and “violence” as synonyms?), readers are nudged to make up their own minds on this issue, and by extension, all questions that are brought up in the book. This is perhaps the best way to summarize why it’s worth reading and discussing.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
May 21, 2012



Lawrence Jarach
That Aside, A Valuable Service
2007

Originally published in "Anarchy: A Journal of Desire
Armed" #63. Spring / Summer 2007, Vol. 24, No. 2.