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Anarchism: From Theory To Practice



Synopsis

Book by Daniel Guérin

Book Information

Paperback: 166 pages

Publisher: Monthly Review Press (January 1, 1970)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0853451753

ISBN-13: 978-0853451754

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 0.5 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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Customer Reviews

Daniel Guérin was a French Marxist who became an anarchist in his latter life. He was also an activist, particularly around Gay rights and the Algerian War of Independence. As such he was almost perfectly qualified to write an introduction to anarchism from the point of view of a well read activist. Most other recent introductions to anarchism have been written by professional academics who thus missed the mass politics that lie at the base of anarchism and tend to give equal weight to insignificant individuals and mass movements. The book starts with an introduction to anarchist theory, covering the major writers. It goes on to look at how these ideas were put into practise, in the construction of the early union movement, in the Russian Revolution and Italian factory councils and finally during the Spanish revolution of 1936. These were times when anarchists numbered in the tens or hundred of thousands. In Spain up to two million members of the anarchist CNT carried out the most large scale voluntary collectivisation of industry and land that history has seen to date. In particular when talking about the failings of the Russian revolution Guérin's Marxist background comes through to great advantage. The Russian Revolution was the failure of Marxism, in particular its failure to realise how easily state power could corrupt a revolutionary party and transform it into a new ruling class. But Guérin never abandoned Marxism completely, he recognised it as a useful economic and analytical tool. His strength was in not only realising the

criticisms of the anarchists about the Marxist view of the state were correct but having the integrity to then become and start to promote anarchism himself.

A basic tenant of Libertarian socialism is that workers should directly control and design what their political representatives' implement and should directly control their workplaces, so as to maximize their own freedom. As Marx stressed in his early writings the will to work, to create, to mold nature to our intellects and creative powers, is part of human nature, our "species-being." When prevented from developing their "species-being" by having to sell themselves to wage slavery, struggling to feed themselves and being fettered by other drudgeries, human beings are degraded. They become dysfunctional and their powers of intellect and creativity are assaulted. They become dysfunctional, anti-social. This would become very rare in a libertarian socialist with maximum personal freedom. A community could lock away any person committing criminal acts in order that his constructive "species-being" could be recuperated. Or if the criminal didn't want to do that, a community could expel the criminal from their midst. People should have a choice, said Bakunin of choosing to live in any community they wanted. If any community in a libertarian socialist society doesn't appeal to them, they can go live in the mountains and forests with the beasts as Bakunin put it. People with alternative lifestyles like nudists could set up their own community and link themselves to regular communities as called for in a program of Spanish anarchists in 1936. Anarchists in the 19th century, Guerin shows, were particularly cognizant of the dangers of authoritarian state socialism. Bakunin gave a particularly prescient prediction about it, though he unfairly described his rival Marx as an adherent of it.

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