

# Rebel Alliances

## Rebel Alliances

AK Press / Dark Star  
paperback  
ISBN: 1904859702  
£15.00

British Anarchism (whatever that is) has been characterised by its idiocy, spontaneity and ability to re-create itself. The journal *Aufheben* famously diagnosed *Class War's* "retarding influence" and a queue of theorists have described anarchism in the UK as dynamic, provocative, but ultimately politically unimportant. Benjamin Franks' *Rebel Alliances* throws a chair through the shop window festooned with the bawdy dummies of such dodgy arguments. From the turn of the century and before, Franks outlines anarchism's rise to pre-eminence as the means and ends to our future society: From Dan Chatterton's post-Chartist *The Atheist Scorcher* (1884) and of course Kropotkin's *Freedom* (1886 on and on) in a detailed analysis of propaganda, deeds, actions and movements right bang-up until Mayday 2000 when Churchill sported a turf Mohican (and beyond).

It's an appropriately epic sweep taking in Punk and DIY culture, ethics, Gorz, class and non-class, ethnicity, sexuality, and everything from 'the Spectacle' to Test Card F and everything in-between, if indeed there is anything 'in-between'.

If Britishness is a concept wilting on the cleft-stick of Brown-Blair absurdism, Franks is quick to defend his terms. This is a geographical not a cultural definition. Second, as Franks points out, among the earliest anarchist groups in Britain in the modern era were Der Arbeiter Frait (The Workers' Friend), Jewish refugees from Tsarist Russia, closely followed (in terms of impact) by such as the Spanish and Italian anarchist influence from the 1920s on. Finally Franks defends the inclusion of, for example, the 26 County WSM (Workers Solidarity Movement) on the grounds that English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish anarchist histories are intimately linked: "Oppression is understood to be contextual and based on opposing dominating forces as they affect that locality, rather than a single universal form of domination that determines all hierarchies."

The writing is inclusive but not vague, rigorous and scholarly but not up its own arse. He takes a reassuring sideswipe at David Miller [Professor of Political Theory at Nuffield College Oxford, author of 'Anarchism', J M Dent & Sons, 1984, and *not* the co-editor of 'Arguments against G8' and Spinwatch as appended in the print issue of Variant - please accept our apologies] who managed to write a whole book on anarchism whilst denying it had any identifiable core assumptions and could scarcely be called a political ideology. But if the book has a subtext it is that as anarchism has grown to dominate the anti-capitalist movement this has not come about overnight or without repercussion. Franks contrasts the rise of the anarchist ethos and practice with the collapse of Leninist and Trotskyist left. If New Labour is the "last dribble of Thatcherism" perhaps Sheridan's Solidarity (sic) etc. is the final speck of Trotskyist dilettantism?

Franks knows his onions and as we (this is the Republican 'we') are troubled by, well virtually everything about the contemporary world, we asked him a series of less than searching questions and he coughed up a host of illuminating, bordering on entertaining replies.

**Variant:** Can anarchists operate in academia? There's the strangely sombre Anarchist Studies and a few people at Goldsmiths and Lancashire University but it's all a bit marginal and half-hearted. Is this a good thing? Or are there other ways that an 'anarchist ethos' has infiltrated and influenced?

**Ben Franks:** Whilst I write on anarchism, and have a great interest in, and sympathy with, many features of anarchism, I should stress I rarely, if ever, think of myself

as 'an anarchist', and certainly don't speak on behalf of anarchists in (or out of) academia. Indeed, as the libertarian-aligned Dissent! rightly points, out "anyone who claims to be speaking on our behalf is lying."

I'm tempted to answer your question with another one – can anarchists operate anywhere? Not that I am suggesting that anarchists are somehow bumbling incompetents, but that there is a contradiction in performing certain roles within capitalism and being an anarchist. An anarchist selling his or her labour as a shopworker, is in a sense withholding commodities from those who cannot afford them. The radical sales assistant may subvert this from time to time, turning a 'blind-eye' to a needy-looking shoplifter for instance, but if they were to live up to their principles *in toto* and, say, give all the goods away all the time to anyone who desired them, then they would be out of a job fairly quickly and without much chance of a decent reference. This is not to criticise subversive shopworkers, but this fine strategy is only feasible if you have something to fall back on or if everyone else simultaneously follows the same tactic (i.e. we had already reached a post-capitalist society).

There are parallels between the shopworker and the person employed in academia (someone selling their labour time to the university). There are certain functions that are antipathetic to anarchist principles, for instance: awarding grades to students which privileges one group against another in the labour market, or maintaining property-rights by policing plagiarism. But like the shop assistant there are certain functions which are compatible with anarchist principles. Whilst the shop assistant might give helpful advice on the use-values of goods, an academic is helping to reduce the hierarchy of knowledge by sharing, hopefully freely and as widely as possible with others.

Similarly, just as there is room for some subversion of managerial authority and imposition of the law of exchange-value in retail, for instance sales assistants organising to challenge the bosses through strike action, or more subversively, by creating greater autonomy through covering for each other to create extended break-times ("Oh yes boss, Jane is back from lunch but she's directing a customer to our other branch"), so too there are possibilities for subversions in academia. However as my boss(es) may be reading this, I'll say nothing more in order to avoid self-incrimination.

Some of the groupings you raise, are not overtly 'anarchist'. For instance, some academics have a purely scholastic interest in anarchism, studying it perhaps as a historical fragment of particular interest in a curious European setting, in the same way that sometimes you will find researchers who study Fascism or Environmental Ethics without having a strong proclivity towards one or the other. Others you mention, in different ways might be seeking to create greater freedoms for themselves and colleagues to pursue research interests, or provide a resource for activists. Whilst there is much to admire in this strategy – academia has often been used as resource – there are substantial risks too. In some instances, too close an association with elite institutions like universities can lead to a domestication of radical thinking. If most anarchist research, writing and theorising emanates from the academy, it can dominate the discourse, making anarchism appear to be a privileged discourse. A parallel with Marxism in the 1970s and '80s is possible here. As Terry Eagleton noted, Marxism ceased to be based around the radical movements of industrial workers in their struggle against capital, but with academics discussing literary texts or education policy. Whilst anarchism (and indeed Marxism) can provide useful techniques for academic study, it would be a



huge disservice if the limited practices of academia dominated – and thus alienated oppressed peoples from engaging, adopting and modifying anarchist principles, methods and ethos in their, often more important, day-to-day struggles.

**Variant:** You mention in your book what your working definition of anarchism is and how you use it. Can you say something about this? I know there's sometimes a tendency for writers to identify anyone who's a bit mad or a bit wacky as 'anarchist' throughout history and then retrospectively gloss in their 'credentials'.

**BF:** You are right. Of course anyone who appears to challenge bourgeois rationality can appear 'mad'. Any form of opposition, whether anti-hierarchical or promoting an alternative hierarchy to the *status quo*, is associated with stigmatised concepts, e.g. "mad Mullahs" or "loony-lefty", so the association of anarchism with insanity is by no means surprising or unusual. What is perhaps distinctive in anarchism has been a willingness to appear eccentric; this may be partly as a result of de-stigmatising mental illness, exposing how it is constructed to police and maintain social order (the influence of Michel Foucault might be relevant here).

Alternatively it could be an acknowledgement that for liberal theorists, such as Max Weber, alternatives will always appear outside of accepted 'rational' discourse: the recent Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) at anti-capitalist/anti-globalisation demonstrations is a self-conscious acknowledgement of the way dominant ideologies portray creative dissent as 'ridiculous' and 'comical'. The anarchism, of say, Emma Goldman and Peter Kropotkin (and maybe we can squeeze in Charles Fourier here too), whilst having its origins in the Enlightenment, and recognising the liberatory potential of reason to transcend the limits of power based on traditional authorities and superstition, nonetheless had some appreciation of the limits of pure reason. Humans may be rational beings, but they are not solely rational beings – they have other drives and desires too. The interest shown in Nietzsche by anarchists is pertinent here. Sean Sheehan stresses the debt contemporary anarchists pay to Nietzsche in his introduction to anarchism, as does the edited collection by John Moore, *I Am Not a Man, I Am Dynamite!*

A more worrying trend, though, has been for some theorists to adopt a wide variety of writers and thinkers into anarchism. Partly this is to shore-up anarchism's academic accreditations. So whilst Peter Marshall's book *Demanding the Impossible* is impressive on a number of grounds, one of the weaknesses is that he includes as 'forerunners' or 'great libertarians' an extensive menagerie of thinkers – the conservative theorist and MP Edmund Burke, the statist Tom Paine, the 'constitutional liberal' John Stuart Mill, and even the Christian messiah (for a movement usually identified by its reaction to 'God and the state'). Such accounts blur to the point of distortion anarchism as a revolutionary, anti-state, egalitarian movement. It also assumes that anarchism's actual traditions are so weak it requires reinforcement from outside. Further, it also raises the questions: why anarchism should feel the need to become academically respectable? Who is it out to impress?

**Variant:** You commented about how publishers locked-on to your work as the anti-capitalist movement kicked in and your efforts to try and explain that it wasn't all about panning in McDonalds' windows. But how do anarchists escape this stereotyping, and isn't some of it their/our own fault? Maybe you can say something about the most creative interventions you have come across that don't operate in this way but that have some real impact on 'everyday life', real communities, ordinary

people etc.?

*BF:* I am not certain what a 'real' community or an 'ordinary' person is, as distinct from an unreal or 'extraordinary' person, but this is me being pedantic. I guess your point here is the highly pertinent one of how can anarchist principles and tactics be incorporated into everyday life?

I should stress that I am not a pacifist. There are times when paning in the windows of McDonalds' is not just excusable but is highly justified; the problem is in being stuck with one particular tactic (smashing windows) or one particular identity (the black-masked vandal) to deal with the myriad, ever-adapting modes of oppression. Dominant powers want to fix the range of responses, as that way we become more predictable and controllable – as a result actions become less threatening, less radical. Certainly it would not be in the commercial media's interests to portray anarchists in a favourable light, so latching onto, universalising and thereby de-contextualising the 'hooligan' version of anarchism is hardly a surprising strategy: dominant powers constructed the stereotype of the black-coated, bearded bomb-thrower in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the ineffectual, effete 'hippy anarchist' in the '70s and early '80s.

To pick out just a couple of tactics risks prioritising them and thus creating a prescriptive taxonomy of responses. Nonetheless, to select a few provisional examples of some of the most creative interventions, these tend to be those which include those principles most consistent with a defensible form of capitalism: rejection of hierarchies, whether based on state, capital or other dominating structure; a repudiation of mediation and thus a renunciation of tactics based on vanguards and prioritising prefigurative methods, in which the means used have to reflect the values of the desired goals. Of course, these principles are adhered to by individuals and groups who do not necessarily adopt the 'anarchist' label. These radical moments hold out the possibility for even greater experiment and adventure

and create new links of solidarity. So there are the practical steps like opening and maintaining social centres – from London's Jubilee Street Club of the late 1890s, or the more recent ones such as the Autonomous Centre in Edinburgh, 1 in 12 in Bradford, Sumac in Nottingham or RampART and London Action Resource Centre in the South East. These are broadly run on non-coercive principles, and these venues open up opportunities for collaborations on a range of cultural and (anti)political actions. There are the workplace structures, such as the Solidarity Federation and the syndicalist IWW, which although in the UK are still tiny, nonetheless still provide useful advice, confidence and support to those resisting managerial authority.

No single struggle takes universal priority over all others. For instance, the fight against patriarchy is not necessarily going to eradicate racism, although it might help (and vice-versa). In certain contexts one type of resistance to oppression is, however, more critical than another. Similarly, no single tactic is sufficient, although in a given context one type of tactic might be more apt than others in resisting heteronomous power in a life-enhancing, liberatory fashion.

