



## Book Reviews

### **Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms**

Benjamin Franks

*AK Press and Dark Star, Edinburgh, 2006, 475pp.*

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Franks' study of the complex and diverse British anarchist movement is inspired by two concerns. In part, he is interested in class struggle anarchism — a category defined by a commitment to egalitarianism and non-hierarchical relations, the rejection of capitalism and market economics, of 'state power and other quasi-state mediating forces' and means-ends consequentialism. In the other part, he wants to defend the claim that contemporary anarchism is consistent with a theoretical position usually called 'postanarchist' — anarchism read through the lens of poststructuralist and/or postmodern theory. These two strands of analysis are fused through a masterful, dizzying account of contemporary anarchist movements and a discussion of prefigurative ethics. From the historical survey, Franks broadens the focus of the study from class struggle anarchism to the rebel alliances of the title — networks of environmental, animal welfare, unemployed and anti-racist groups, who come together to share ideas and collaborate in actions without compromising their independence or autonomy — a move that usefully provides an organizational bridge to postanarchist diversity. In the theoretical argument, unpacked in a comprehensive discussion of revolutionary agency, organization and tactics, Franks arrives at a defining anarchist principle: that 'means and ends are irreducible parts of the same process' (p. 99). Not only does this principle serve to distinguish class struggle anarchism from Leninism, it also points to a rejection of the 'utopian' totalizing systems that exercise postanarchist critique.

Franks' attempt to subject British anarchisms to serious analysis is something to celebrate, all the more so given his concern to speak through these movements by drawing on their literatures and practices. And while his sympathies are clear, he successfully steers a course between observation and activism. In many ways, his work has a very contemporary feel: for Franks anarchism is first a 'mode of revolutionary action' (p. 23) not mere theory; and readers keen to see anarchism released from a narrow concern with Bakunin and Kropotkin will be excited by his approach. Franks refers to the classics, but only in passing and in order to 'elucidate the explanations of more recent activists' (p. 24). Although it's not clear that 'the thousands participating in



libertarian events' are any more familiar with the work of Foucault and Deleuze than they are with the established canon, Franks' suggestion is that modern anarchism owes more to continental theory and situationism than it does to 19th and 20th century anarchist thought. Yet in other ways, the book has a very old-fashioned ring. It's not surprising to discover that class struggle anarchists are intent on avoiding the pitfalls of Leninism, but the lengthy discussions of vanguardism, universal classes, sub-classes, non-classes and revolutionary consciousness — Engels' position on strikes, even — are a depressing reminder of the muscular language and understanding of the world bequeathed by 19th and 20th century Marxism; and Franks' treatment of these issues adds a dryness to the text that belies the surreal, playfully subversive, carnivalesque that he identifies with anarchism.

The central theme of the book, that anarchism is defined by a commitment to a prefigurative ethic, is interesting and attractive but it raises certain problems that Franks does not resolve. One concerns the use of violence and the claim made by pacifists that violent means compromise the hope of achieving a liberated non-violent society. Franks dismisses the claim on the grounds that the anarchist rejection of hierarchy is consistent with 'violent acts' (such as sado-masochism) and because conflict is inevitable within the existing structures of domination (pp. 141–145). But what if the pacifist concern is re-written — as it has been — in terms of the achievement of a society without domination? Class struggle anarchists reject 'instrumentalist strategies that appeal to the ultimate millennial events such as "the revolution"' (p. 114). So at what point — if any — will they be satisfied that the existing structures of domination have been overcome? The implication seems to be that physical coercion is okay as long as it comes from below. A second problem arises in his treatment of consequentialism, which he defines with reference to Leninism as a willingness to use any methods to justify a predetermined good rather than, as is usually understood, a concern to assess the rightness and wrongness of actions by their likely costs and benefits (p. 98). Kropotkin rejected both views (the latter, incidentally, underpinned his rejection of propaganda by the deed); but a concern with possible outcomes is surely not inconsistent with prefigurative ethics? Finally, it's possible to question the association Franks makes between class struggle anarchism and postanarchism, which is importantly mediated by prefigurative ethics. The postanarchist insistence on the newness of their ideas and their departure from the so-called classical tradition is not always borne out by Franks' analysis. Albeit in passing, he quotes approvingly writers like Jean Grave and James Guillaume who, while easily absorbed into class-struggle traditions, were firmly rooted in the modern. Franks' identification of the confluence of ideas is important and refreshing and it would be interesting to see the links and implications fleshed out.



Nevertheless, the absence of the discussion here does not detract from his achievement in producing a groundbreaking and thought-provoking book that deserves to be read widely.

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**Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation**

Benjamin Arditi

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Consider this disagreement. First, Ernesto Laclau, the arch-theorist of culture and politics as hegemony, has taken to arguing that all politics is basically populism (Laclau, 2005). Second, Jacques Rancière has recently declared that populism is nothing more than ‘the convenient name under which is dissimulated [...] the difficulty [of] government’: ‘The hope is that under this name they will be able to lump together every form of dissent in relation to the prevailing consensus, whether it involves democratic affirmation or religious and racial fanaticism’ (Rancière, 2007, 80). In other words, for Rancière, ‘populism’, here, is really just a pejorative term for a situation in which people will not be governed ‘properly’, without division or remainder. Third, however, Benjamin Arditi’s new book *both* takes issue with Laclau’s reduction of all species of politics to populism *and* uses a strongly Rancière-informed perspective to dissect and determine more precisely what the enigmatic phenomenon ‘populism’ actually is. This is an interesting disagreement indeed.

Now, according to Rancière’s already classic and seminal book of political theory, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (1998), a disagreement is:

a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying. Disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness. (Rancière, 1998, x)