The Utopian

John Clark

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a review of

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The Utopian is a promising new anarchist journal that will probably strike various readers quite differently, depending on their expectations. Those who, guided by the subtitle, are looking for a new "journal of anarchism and libertarian socialism" will probably find it to be much to their liking, since it focuses heavily on theory and is more sophisticated in this area than most anarchist publications. On the other hand, those drawn to the title expecting daring flights of the utopian imagination, or investigations of the status of various Temporary Autonomous Zones may be a bit let down.

The rather substantial inaugural issue consists of an editorial statement, three articles and a generous smattering of utopian graphics drawn primarily from Blake. The first article, "Karl Marx's Theory of Capital," is a thorough, well-informed and intelligent, though rather one-sided, critique that will appeal to those interested in serious social theory. The second, "Anarchism as Extreme Democracy" is a useful brief introduction to its topic that remains on a rather general level. And the concluding article, "Anarchism and William Blake's Idea of Jesus," is an intriguing and insightful analysis that should be very stimulating to true aficionados of utopian thought.

A Dystopian Marx

Ron Tabor's article deserves the most detailed attention both because of its theoretical ambitiousness and because it constitutes half of the entire issue. The article seems in some ways a strange choice for the opening article of a journal entitled *The Utopian*, since it is an extensive theoretical analysis that has nothing obvious to do with utopian thought or practice. On the other hand, the article is well worth reading, especially by those who are not sufficiently informed on the details of Marxian economics and its relationship to Marxist politics—important topics for anyone interested in radical social thought. Tabor himself is quite well informed and does a very good job of summarizing clearly Marx's views on such topics as capital, the commodity, the theory of value, and economic exploitation. In fact, I have seldom come across any anarchist critics (including those with a Marxist background) who have nearly the depth of knowledge of Marxian political economy that he does.

Ironically, this is both the strength and weakness of Tabor's analysis. He quite clearly brings to his critique a thorough and detailed knowledge of Marx. However, since he is strongly reacting against the Marxist movement through which he presumably gained much of that knowledge, that critique is very one-sidedly negative. In fact, he ultimately dismisses Marxism as nothing more than a dangerous theoretical and psychological addiction: "Once one has adopted it, Marxism is very difficult to give up and, like other types of addiction, usually entails an intense emotional and moral crisis to do so." (p. 31) I suspect that this is the key to the one-sidedness of Tabor's analysis. He has the sound of a Marxists Anonymous member who not only wants to avoid completely his former drug of choice but also can't imagine that others might indulge in it beneficially without getting hooked. Perhaps having suffered from a serious overdose of bad Marxism, he overlooks its more benign and medicinal qualities—as found, for example, in its critical and dialectical perspective, in its ethical critique of domination, and (not least significantly in view of his journal's title) in its healthy dose of utopianism.

In Tabor's view, "the systems that emerged from Marxist revolutions...flow from the underlying logic of Marxism itself" and "instead of being the perversion or negation of Marxism...represent its true meaning." (p. 5) He is certainly correct in stressing the importance of understanding what in classical Marxism contributed to the development of bureaucratic centralist and state capitalist regimes. There is a great deal there that deserves the most probing critique (including its centralist, statist politics, its productionism, and its technological utopianism, to mention only a few areas), something that

Tabor often does very well in his article. Nevertheless, from a critical and dialectical perspective, such developments can be seen neither as simply a "perversion" with no basis in Marx's own ideas, as some Marxist apologist would argue, nor simply as the expression of an inexorable "underlying logic," as some critics would argue. Though Tabor rightly attacks "idealist" views, the search for one "true meaning" of a complex, diverse, and in many ways self-contradictory outlook such as Marx's is itself an idealist method of interpretation. For Tabor "Marxism is a closed system whose practitioners share the same philosophical credo." (p. 7) But isn't this a rather closed view of Marxism? It doesn't recognize the critical and dialectical aspects of Marx and the Marxian tradition, not to mention their libertarian and indeed utopian dimensions.

Tabor defends the rather iconoclastic thesis that despite Marx's reputation as the Founding Father of historical Materialism, his "analysis of capital is not materialist" but rather "a form of philosophical Idealism, the belief that ideas or concepts are the ultimate reality" (p. 17). As shocking as this claim about the great materialist might seem, it actually forms part of an old and venerable tradition, going back to Marx's own generation of Left Hegelians, all of whom labored mightily to expose the latent idealism of all the others and thereby to demonstrate their own superior radicalism. It is illuminating to look carefully at how Tabor undertakes his demonstration of Marx's idealism. He uncovers it, for example, in Marx's analysis of value. Tabor, sounding like a good empiricist, contends that "once expended" labor "no longer exists." Thus, when Marx says that "labor is embodied in a commodity" this can only mean that "it is a kind of ethereal, non-material substance that-reposes there." Ergo, Marx's theory "is in fact a form of Idealism" (p. 18).

However, it seems to me that what the statement really shows is that Marx's theory is a dialectical one-at least in this case. Analytical thought divides things into discrete entities, while dialectical thought discovers continuities and internal relationships between seemingly separate phenomena. Of course, in a meaningful and quite simple sense, labor ceases at a certain point in time. But in an equally meaningful, and more complex sense, labor is present in that which it produces. This is particularly evident in the case of labor in which a worker produces an object that is an expression of some creative or innovative idea. It simply cannot be demonstrated that the creative activity "ends" in all meaningful senses at a certain point and is in no way "embodied" in the object. For the object or product is in a coherent sense a continuation of the creative activity of the worker. Whether the activity is conceptualized as ending at a particular point in time or continuing through a larger process is not a question of the nature of the phenomena, but rather of the way in which human beings apply categories to a constantly changing yet continuous reality. Thus, as a dialectical analysis would have it, the product is in a quite meaningful and important sense an "embodiment" not only of the generalized "laboring activity" of the worker but also of the quite specific selfhood (be it as the self-expression or as self-negation) of the worker.

Tabor is also strongly critical of both Marx and the entire Marxist tradition for what he sees as their firm commitment to economic determinism. By this is meant the view that "the development of material production" is "the determining factor, the one that is ultimately responsible for the character and evolution of all the other spheres of society and society as a whole" (p. 25). This interpretation of history was classically stated by Marx in the "Preface" to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and elsewhere and has been widely adopted by Marxist thinkers and movements. Nevertheless it must be recognized that it has been rejected by many of the most sophisticated Marxist theorists, and Marx's own thought is too complex, and indeed too self-contradictory to conclude that such a view was simply and unambiguously his own. It is well known that some of his sweeping generalizations in works like the "Preface" and the *Communist Manifesto* are significantly amended or even contradicted by his detailed analyses elsewhere.

Tabor correctly points out many of the shortcomings of such economic determinism, but the alternative that he proposes raises some questions of its own. He says that in explaining why capitalism emerged from feudal society "a Marxist would look for the answer in the realm of material production," while in his own view "the answer lies not in the economic nature of feudalism, but in feudalism's political structure." For him it lies "specifically in the fact that feudalism was decentralized-political

power was fragmented so that neither the state, nor the Catholic Church, nor any other institution was powerful enough to impose its sway throughout the entire realm in which feudal, or feudal-type, societies predominated" (p. 27). Tabor notes the significance of "the geography, climate and prior history of northern Europe, all of which combined' to give birth to the politically decentralized society known as feudalism." (p. 27)

There is no doubt that the factors that Tabor mentions must be taken into account in an adequate theoretical explanation. This is, in fact why classical anarchist theorists like Bakunin, Kropotkin and especially Reclus had much to add and to correct in Marx's own analysis. However, even an orthodox historical materialist would accept the significance of the factors mentioned by Tabor as preconditions for capitalist development. Where the former would differ is in stressing the crucial importance of technological and economic factors in explaining the fact that a revolutionary change took place in that society. We can agree that, as Tabor contends, it is not true that technological or economic determination "in the last instance" is "the answer" to all questions concerning this process. It is not clear, however, why we should see the political structure as "the answer" either, particularly to the question of why revolutionary change took place at one particular time in history. After all, a decentralized feudal system existed for a thousand years without the emergence of capitalism. A non-dogmatic, dialectical approach would consider the role of all of the factors mentioned without assuming that one is always the ultimate social determinant, but also without assuming that some factors are not predominant in some historical epochs or in some periods of revolutionary transition. In Tabor's view, perhaps the greatest weakness in Marx's philosophy of history is the fact that it is a "circular analysis" in which the dynamics of capitalism he describes will automatically "lead to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialism" (p. 29).

The "directionality" that Marx finds in history is merely asserted, rather than proven, and is then used as a wide-ranging explanatory principle. It is true that Marx sometimes analyzes social transformation this way, and such an approach has spawned various mechanistic and rigidly structuralist Marxisms that have caused much theoretical and practical mischief. And there is no doubt that Marx deserves some of the blame for these developments. But he should also be given credit for diagnosing at a very early point in its history the destructive and self-destructive dynamic that is built into capitalism, even if he did not, as Tabor correctly argues, demonstrate that this dynamic would necessarily produce a liberatory social transformation. Furthermore, one should remember that despite some apparently deterministic accounts of history, Marx also stated rather famously that the result of this destructive dynamic would not necessarily be socialism, but rather "socialism or barbarism." And he sometimes recognized that either a popular struggle or the lack of such a struggle—not just some abstract laws of history—would determine the outcome.

Tabor goes to some length to argue that Marx's theories lack the qualities of verifiability and falsifiability that define a scientific theory, and is thus merely "philosophy." "Philosophy" seems here to be a synonym for "just a matter of opinion." However, the contention that "Marxism is philosophy, not science" (p. 19) is not really very devastating, except to kinds of Marxism that hardly deserve serious consideration. Many Marxist critical theorists, Marxist humanists, existential and phenomenological Marxists, and other non-dogmatic Marxists long ago did their own very sophisticated critique of scientistic, positivistic and reductionist Marxism, often on a deeper philosophical level than most anarchist critiques. Such theorists have been interested precisely in the value of Marxism as philosophy—as dialectical social analysis and critique of ideology. Anarchist critics of Marxist orthodoxy need to be in dialogue with such tendencies in the Marxian tradition, rather than writing them out of the history of radical thought.

Getting Out The Anarchist Vote

Wayne Price's "Anarchism as Extreme Democracy" is well worth looking at as an introduction to issues concerning the relationship between anarchism and democracy.

He includes informative discussions of both the anarchist critique of democracy and democratic critiques of anarchism, in addition to defending the importance of democracy to anarchist politics.

The standpoint of the author seems very reasonable. On the one hand he forthrightly rejects all illusory and ideological forms of democracy. He contends that "a democratic theory which is really radical would strongly deny that the existing patriarchal/racist capitalist state is truly democratic, would oppose the whole socially alienated, bureaucratic-military state machine, and would propose instead a democratic federation of assemblies and associations. Anything less will gloss over the undemocratic, anti-democratic nature of our society and its state" (p. 38). On the positive side, Price presents a strong case for authentic libertarian grassroots democracy as integral to anarchist politics, and indeed as a practical necessity—though abstentionist anarchists will probably object (with some justification) that he gives anti-electoral arguments rather short shrift.

Despite its strengths, the article unfortunately often stays on a rather general level and leaves the reader waiting for more details of the case. Price never explores the really difficult problems for anarchist democratic theory. For example, he doesn't really confront adequately the question of how extremely decentralized democracy would operate in a world of high population, urbanization, economic and technological complexity, and, in general, high levels of interrelationship and interdependency. Like most other advocates of anarchist federative democracy based on assemblies, mandated and recallable delegates, etc., he doesn't face a troubling dilemma: that federations based on such policies would either be unworkable or would increasingly develop state-like features. He also sidesteps another key question: whether anything like the existing urban, industrial, technological order is compatible with a truly anarchist society. There may, of course, be very good answers to such questions, and perhaps they can be explored in future issues.

Jesus the Anar-Christ

Christopher Z. Hobson's "Anarchism and William Blake's Idea of Jesus" constitutes a very engaging and perceptive analysis of Blake, the great anarchist utopian poet, artist and visionary. This article is by far the most interesting one from the standpoint of utopian anarchism.

For Hobson, Blake has a crucial lesson for anarchists. Anarchists, he says, believe in a free communal society similar to that of the early Christians. But they usually reject religion as a cohesive social force and propose "that with the destruction of the state and oppressive classes, unchained human desire can create and uphold this communal society." Blake, on the other hand, believes that what is also necessary to sustain a free community is "mutual love and even faith," realities "that he sums up in his idea of Jesus." (p. 44) Hobson explains that what Blake means by God or Jesus is not a supernatural being but rather "all humans, when they are able to live in love and mutual self-sacrifice" and practice the virtues of "mercy, pity, peace, and love." Satan, on the other hand, represents "individual cruelty, sexual and moral hypocrisy" and "human institutional oppression," alias "Congregated Assemblies of wicked men." (pp. 48–49)

Hobson points out that Blake was a critic not only of the existing system of domination but also of deceptive visions of liberation. On the one hand, he "showed that pure or instinctual desire, without a larger vision of human solidarity, could be captured and perverted by authoritarian ideas and political forces, and turned into a lust for power," while, on the other hand, he "began dramatizing and criticizing other assumptions of the French revolutionaries and the English radicals of the time—among them the idea of an enlightened leadership that could guide the people to freedom without their own conscious participation; the assumption that one liberating voice could speak for all the people; and the belief

that the moment of liberation (in Blake's biblical terms, of apocalypse) was determined by God and knowable in advance." (p. 48) He was thus the perfect proto-anarchist, presenting both an inspiring ideal of a liberated community and a critique of new forms of domination disguised as liberation.

Hobson's analysis is throughout very convincing and conveys some of the truly radically libertarian spirit of this great Apostle of Freedom. I would only amend it slightly. Somehow "mutual self-sacrifice" doesn't quite describe civic virtue in Blake's Republic of Desire. I would think of it more as the abundant exchange of gifts. And even if "pure desire" in isolation from other feelings might lead us astray, it also seems like the perfect term for something that he valued very highly:

Bring me my Bow of burning Gold: Bring me my Arrows of desire
Bring me my Spear: O Clouds Unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!"

The Chariot ride leads of course to Utopia, or as Blake puts it, to the New Jerusalem that is to be built on the ashes of those "dark Satanic mills" that now infest the land.

Hobson notes that Blake's Jesus is important in view of the great masses of people who adhere to Christianity. There is certainly some truth to this. If their Doors of Perception were opened, these Christians might see Blake's Jesus. However, we can hardly overestimate the challenge facing this anarchist Jesus in today's world. St. Paul said that Jesus was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. I'm afraid that Blake's radical Jesus will be both a stumbling block and utter foolishness for most Christians. On the other hand, who knows, he might just fool everybody and wake up the living dead.

The Utopians

The goals of the editorial group of *The Utopian* are admirable: "to reinvigorate the ideal of anarchism" and to seek "the threads in today's world that may, if we can find them and follow them, lead to a future worth dying for and living in." (p. 4) They find these threads in the "small ways" in which "every day, people live by cooperation, not competition," whether by "filling in for a co-worker, caring for the old woman upstairs, helping out at AA meetings, donating for hurricane relief." (p. 3) This seems like an excellent focus, and I hope that they will develop this emphasis on care, compassion, and cooperation in future issues, and explore its relationship to the utopian spirit.

As the great utopian philosopher Martin Buber points out in *Paths in Utopia*, we cannot expect to create a cooperative society unless we learn cooperation on the most intimate personal scale. The cooperative commonwealth will ultimately be a large community consisting of a multitude of vital, authentic small communities. Utopia always lies at the heart of everyday life. As Gary Snyder says (I think very much in the spirit of Blake), the truly realized person knows how to "delight in the ordinary." Ordinary people, ordinary places, ordinary experiences. Utopia is perhaps in "the final instance" the ecstasy of everyday life! *The Utopian* has brought together a group of thoughtful, intelligent and sophisticated writers who have begun a worthwhile project. They seem to be searching for a clear focus and sense of direction, as is usual with a new undertaking. Anyone interested in serious contemporary anarchist and utopian thought, particularly from a theoretical point of view, would do well to follow their progress.

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