

Living in a world of dreams to come?

Freedom press and the anarchist struggle

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“Here’s your deliveries - oh and I assume you’ve heard the news, Margaret Thatcher is dead?” Interrupting a conversation at Freedom Press about police violence during the 1990 poll tax riots, the postman’s announcement possesses a certain poignancy. In a ramshackle building concealed down a gloomy Whitechapel alleyway, the anarchist collective encompasses a bookshop, a social activist centre and publishing house.

In February 2013, the collective’s shop premises were firebombed. Resigned, yet cheerily pragmatic, Andy Meinke suspects the far right. “No one this time has claimed it. That possibly shows they’ve got a great deal of sense. In our experience of these things over the years, it doesn’t tend to come from the major organisations, it tends to come from a few individuals slightly associated with them. The far right has never given up the concept of street politics or intimidating their opponents.” Its long-standing commitment to fighting the extreme right has predictably earned Freedom Press enemies of the fanatical variety. Their first firebomb attack came in 1993 and was claimed by the neo-Nazi group Combat 18 and 1999 they were subject to a serious nail-bombing.

For Freedom, the fight against fascism is tantamount to an historical crusade. “Fascism been in retreat in broad historical terms but it has always been dangerous. It has always been something that needs to be combated. [Fascists are] working in a fertile environment in that the mainstream media provides them with a huge amount of help... Liberalism is the middle class when they feel secure, and fascism is the middle class when they’re afraid.”

It would seem broadly true that the ongoing economic crisis is creating a propitious context for neo-fascism across Britain and Europe, manifesting in the rise of extremist far-right party Golden Dawn in Greece, the neo-Nazi party Jobbik (currently the third largest in Hungary), and the recent celebration of a fascist era statue in Brescia, Italy. Yet in a 1944 article, George Orwell famously posed the question ‘What is Fascism?’ and concluded that the term ‘is almost entirely meaningless’. Meinke disagrees.”[The term] peels away the disguises of every time they say ‘we’re not fascists but...’

freedom

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FREEDOM.

THROUGH the long ages of grinding slavery behind us, Freedom, that unknown goal of human pilgrimage, has hovered, a veiled splendour, upon the horizon of men's hopes. Veiled in the trembling ignorance of mankind, their misty unreasoning fear of all that revealed itself as power, whether it were an apparently incomprehensible and uncontrollable natural force, or the ascendancy of superior strength, ability or cunning in human society. The inward attitude of slavish adoration towards what imposes itself from without as a fact beyond our understanding, that is the veil which hides Freedom from the eyes of men. Sometimes it takes the form of the blind fear of a savage of his "medicine" or his fetish, sometimes of the equally blind reverence of an English workman for the law of his masters, and the semblance of consent to his own economic slavery worn out of him by the force of representation. But whatever the form the reality is the same, ignorance, superstitions terror, cowardly submission.

What is human progress but the advance of the swathing tide of revolt against this tyranny of the nightmare of ignorant dread, which has held men the slaves of external nature, of one another, and of themselves? Science and the arts, knowledge and all its varied shapes of practical application by ingenuity and skill, the binding and enlightening force of affection and social feeling, the protest of individuals and of peoples by word and deed against religious, economic, political and social oppression, these, one and all, are weapons in the hands of the Rebels against the Powers of Darkness sheltered behind their shield of authority, divine and human. But they are weapons not all equally effective at all times. Each has its period of special utility.

We are living at the close of an era during which the marvellous increase of knowledge left social feeling behind, and enabled the few who monopolised the newly acquired power over nature to create an artificial civilisation, based upon their exclusive claim to retain private, personal possession of the increased wealth produced.

Property—not the claim to use, but to a right to prevent others from using—enables individuals who have appropriated the means of production, to hold in subjection all those who possess nothing but their vital energy, and who must work that they may live. No work is possible without land, materials, and tools or machinery; thus the masters of these things are the masters also of the destitute workers, and can live in idleness upon their labour, paying them in wages only enough of the produce to keep them alive, only employing so many of them as they find profitable and leaving the rest to their fate.

Such a wrong once realised is not to be borne. Knowledge cannot long be monopolised, and social feeling is innate in human nature, and both are fomenting within our hide-bound Society as the yeast in the dough. Our age is on the eve of a revolt against property, in the name of the common claim of all to a common share in the results of the common labour of all.

Therefore, we are Socialists, disbelievers in Property, advocates of the equal claim of each man and woman to work for the community

by man in any shape and under any pretext. The human freedom to which our eyes are raised is no negative abstraction of license for individual egoism, whether it be massed collectively as majority rule or isolated as personal tyranny. We dream of the positive freedom which is essentially one with social feeling; of free scope for the social impulses, now distorted and compressed by Property, and its guardian the Law; of free scope for that individual sense of responsibility, of respect for self and for others, which is vitiated by every form of collective interference, from the enforcing of contracts to the hanging of criminals; of free scope for the spontaneity and individuality of each human being, such as is impossible when one hard and fast line is fitted to all conduct. Science is teaching mankind that such crime as is not the manufacture of our vile economic and legal system, can only be rationally as well as humanely treated by fraternal medical care, for its results from deformity or disease, and a hard and fast rule of conduct enforced by condign punishment is neither guide nor remedy, nothing but a perennial source of injustice amongst men.

We believe each man adult human being to possess an equal and indefeasible claim to direct his life from within by the light of his own consciousness, to the sole responsibility of guiding his own action as well as forming his own opinions. Further, we believe that the acknowledgment of this claim is a necessary preliminary to rational voluntary agreement, the only permanent basis of harmonious life in common. Therefore, we reject every method of enforcing assent, as in itself a hindrance to effectual co-operation, and further, a direct incentive to anti-social feeling. We deprecate as a wrong to human nature, individually, and therefore collectively, all use of force for the purpose of coercing others; but we assert the social duty of each to defend, by force if need be, his dignity as a free human being, and unlike dignity in others, from every form of insult and oppression.

We claim for each and all the personal right and social obligation to be free. We hold the complete social recognition and acknowledgment of such a claim to be the goal of human progress in the future, as its growth has been the gauge of development of Society in the past, of the advance of man from the blind social impulse of the propertious animal to the conscious social feeling of the free human being.

Such, in rough outline, is the general aspect of the Anarchist Socialism our paper is intended to set forth, and by the touchstone of this belief we propose to try the current ideas and modes of action of existing Society.

THE COMING REVOLUTION.

We are living on the eve of great events. Before the end of this century has come we shall see great revolutionary movements breaking up our social conditions in Europe and probably also in the United States of America.

Socialist states cannot be forecast with the same accuracy as those



It is something that people understand and it [is] inextricably [linked] with the excesses that we know the far-right is responsible for. Propaganda terms are useful because they convey ideas.”

With around eighty books in print, Freedom press has mostly recently published the book *Beating the Fascists: the Untold Story of Anti-Fascist Action* (2010), a collaborative book written by a cross section of anti-fascist activists, published under the name of Sean Birchall. The book offers an immensely powerful history of the militant anti-fascist movement from the late 1970s to the late 1990s. It is a bleak indictment of the mainstream media and the political authorities’ often inconsistent attitude towards fascist street violence. It’s not from a particularly anarchist viewpoint, it’s more from the view of *Anti-Fascist Action*, which was a coalition of socialist and anarchists and some others. We wouldn’t actually politically agree with all the analysis, but we think it’s an extremely valuable history of something most mainstream publishers wouldn’t touch for the potential of being sued. We’re not worried about being sued - for one thing we’ve got no money, and the history of people trying to sue anarchists, if you look at things like the McLibel trial, it tends to generate us a great deal more publicity than it does us harm.”

But Freedom are under no illusions that that an anarchist revolution is either inevitable or imminent. Meinke’s outlook is steadfastly rooted in the practical: “One of the dynamics of revolutionary change is that you need someone on the extreme revolutionary side to move the cogs up the wheel, to shift the balance of mainstream thought.” Whilst committed to publishing traditional anarchist literature from Peter Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta and Charlotte Wilson et al., Freedom are breezily candid about the dangers of appearing anachronistic in a contemporary political context. “We are not living in the 19th century and anarchists have to come to terms with the fact that after you got universal suffrage, continuing to act as if you’re run by despots does make you look silly. But that doesn’t mean you can’t point out the flaws in the current system [and] a democratic set-up which is designed to make change as difficult as possible. As the Franco-Prussian war spawns the commune, and the Russian revolution spawns Soviets, the model for setting up genuinely democratic forms of society is to be found as people expe-



rience and change. The past ones seem to be no longer totally applicable because your community has changed from being where you live and the workplace you're in, to a vast amount of social networks available to people online. People's friendship groups are scattered geographically and people's ways of organising are transformed. We already see some interesting things; it happened with the SWP attempting to get people not to talk about things online utterly back-firing. But we see it with the judiciary trying to clamp down on social media because they can't really get their heads around the idea that this is the way ideas are going to be communicated."

Meinke has witnessed several decades of protest. He gestures to a large photo tacked to the wall showing a young woman confronting a police officer on a poll tax protest. Like all iconic photos, it seems impersonal to the outside observer, despite its patent visual power. "Lorraine Vivien. She got a year in prison for that. Her mum shopped her." But with the recent student occupation over privatisation at Sussex University, Meinke is optimistic about the prospects of student militancy. "I'd been really scared over post-Millbank [2010] ... that student activism had collapsed and curtailed. It was really nice to go to Brighton . which is very difficult to get to, particularly as an out-of-town campus."

Yet with the Coalition's increasingly brutal programme of austerity, one might wonder whether Freedom feel any sense of frustration with the wider left in the drive to foster popular resistance. Recognising the historical divisions between anarchists and Marxists (expelled from the First International's Congress in 1872, an anarchist wing set up a counter-congress at a cafe over the road in Geneva), it is perhaps unsurprising that Freedom does not consider itself wholly integrated with the left as a whole. "For the last four years, the left has been desperately looking for how we understand the economic crisis and how we respond to it. Anarchism is part of the left but there have been tendencies in the past for anarchists to

2 BRIGHTON IS THE SITE OF AN ONGOING STUDENT PROTEST AGAINST THE OUTSOURCING OF 235 SUSSEX UNIVERSITY CAMPUS JOBS,
3 PAUL B. SMITH, 'BAKUNIN'S EXPULSION FROM THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL',

4 A SENIOR PARTY MEMBER ACCUSED OF RAPE WAS CRUELY 'TRIED' BY A JURY OF HIS FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES THROUGH AN INTERNAL DISPUTES COMMITTEE AND WIDER DISSENT WAS PENALISED.

be very inward-looking. I think that's less true now and at the same time, a large part of the traditional British Trotskyist left have been looking at new models of organisation that have come out of Reclaim The Streets [and] Occupy. A lot of the issues that are coming up, like the recent crisis in the SWP, affect everyone across the left." Meinke accepts that the anarchist wing should not be exempt from criticism." We shouldn't gloat, because it's something I've seen happen the anarchist movement and dealt with really badly - maybe not in the same sort of ways, but with organisational inertia, very few people being willing to challenge hierarchies. [I realise] that a huge amount of people in the left just haven't taken sexual violence seriously for a long time. That will need to be re-examined in a major way."

First published in 1886 and edited by Charlotte Wilson and Peter Kropotkin, Freedom magazine was originally 'for socialist anarchism', although the 'socialist' tag was subsequently dropped. The current ambitions of the newspaper remain modest. Moving towards making all their books available electronically, Freedom are simply aiming to maintain the paper, whether in print form or electronically. "We had a structural engineer who came round and said '[the building is] safe for five years, possibly even ten!'. At some point we will want to move out of here, somewhere on a street front to get more passing trade."

Whitechapel, where the bookshop has been located since 1969, has a long history of accommodating political subversives. Fuelled by increased political and anti-Semitic violence in Russia following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, the East End saw a vast wave of Jewish, socialist and anarchist immigration. Across the road from the Freedom Press building is Altab Ali park, named after a Bangladeshi man killed by fascists in the 1970s. Nearby, Cable Street witnessed the famed 1936 confrontation between Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts, the police and a broad section of anti-fascist protestors. Meinke is despondent about recent changes taking place across London. "We are seeing a virtual clear-out of certain areas, as the council is paying people to live outside London. We've spent years talking about a yupification but this is a social purge of frightening proportions. The austerity programme has been delayed and is now coming big-time."

Shadowed by the hyper-gentrified Spitalfields and the headquarters of banking giant RBS, Freedom coexists uneasily with the symbols of the system it has resolved to change. The building provides office and meeting space for small, local resistance groups such as Corporate Watch, the Advisory Service for Squatters and the London Coalition against Poverty. "[In the last ten years, activism is] increasingly a much more important part of our work. It's a shift in the anarchist movement itself and a shift in the people attracted to Freedom. Until 2002, it was virtually owned by someone who was of a rather liberal bent and that has shifted. We like to think were involved with ongoing struggles, and anti-fascism is one of those."

It was Kropotkin who noted, "it is often said that Anarchists live in a world of dreams to come, and do not see the things which happen today. We do see them only too well, and in their true colours, and that is what makes us carry the hatchet into the forest of prejudice that besets us". Wary of hierarchical organisations, Freedom Press remain committed to the grass roots struggle for social transformation which roots them in the east London community. Buoyed by international struggles yet steadfastly pragmatic about the slow realities of change, its ideology and approach retains a kind of practical beauty, premised on human beneficence, challenging hatred, and the vast power of collective, horizontal organisation.

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