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Wooden Shoes or Platform Shoes: Class Struggle Social Democrats: Or, The Press of Business

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AK Press 2006, 80 pages, paper.

This is a leaner, meaner AK Press Catalog than the previous annuals “which g[ot] longer and more expensive each year,” thus announcing up front what AK Press is about: money. “We are highlighting the AK Press editions” – from which AK profits twice, as publisher and as distributor – and “new distribution items” (to see if they sell well enough to qualify for the third category, which is) “a selection of customer favorites” (faster moving product). There is of course some self-fulfilling circularity here. Product sells because it is advertised, and is advertised because it sells. But quality is not mentioned as a consideration in AK marketing decisions, any more than it figures in AK publishing decisions. AK is at least consistent. But so are serial killers.

Nonetheless, the new catalog is otherwise just like the earlier versions “less of more of the same,” as some wag once witticized. A majority of the material AK publishes, and a still larger majority of what it distributes, is still not anarchist. Not merely not anarchist in some purist sense, but not anarchist by any stretch of the imagination (a quality notably lacking, anyway, at AK Press), and not even marketed as anarchist by the AK Press Gang.

Likewise the tradition continues of reserving the cover illustration for authoritarian leftists. This time it depicts macho Black Panther Party leaders posturing at a press conference, and is taken from a new AK production, an over twelve-hour DVD on this racial nationalist, male supremacist, agent-ridden gang. The police so exaggerated the Party’s own revolutionary chest-thumping that they came to believe their own lies and violently suppressed the Party. I wonder if the footage includes the odious odysseys of Huey Newton (gunned down during a drug deal) and Eldridge Cleaver (who, even before hiring out to the right, celebrated his rape of white women as an affirmation of his black manhood). I hope it also includes a Panther leader’s speech to the last SDS convention, orating that the proper position for women in the movement was prone. (Did he mean “supine,” or was he a sodomite?) There was nothing anarchist about this self-styled vanguard party, unless you count its brief, overpublicized operation of a soup kitchen.

The nine new AK titles are a fair biopsy (would that it were an autopsy) of the Catalog. Only two titles are unequivocally anarchist. The only book worth reading is the reprint of *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution*. Typically it

is by a member of the classical anarchist pantheon. AK would never publish anything so radical if Goldman were writing today. The other title is *Rebel Alliances* by Ben Franks, "Concentrating on the class-struggle tradition within anarchism, as represented by the current national federations in Britain." There are books that you can't put down. This is one that you can't pick up. I can put it down without picking it up.

There's a CD from fading pop stars and self-styled anarchists Chumbawamba, one of AK's financial angels (the others are Noam Chomsky and AK founder Ramsay Kanaan's rich mother, whose initials are "AK"). And there is an anthology of "academic scholars and engaged individuals" (yawn) co-edited by fired professor David Graeber, an example of a familiar figure on the AK scene: a social democrat who calls himself an anarchist. But anyway this is not an anarchist book. The rest? There is the Panther DVD; the Stalinist old (public) school boy Alexander Cockburn; liberal publicity hound Jello Biafra; media critic Robert Fisk; and the unspeakable Ward Churchill.

Churchill is truly a piece of work: ex-Long Range Recon ("search and destroy") in Vietnam; ex-Weatherman; ex-white man; American Indian Movement splitter; tenured faculty without a Ph.D or a single scholarly publication; non-Indian pan-Indian nationalist; anti-Semite; and, needless to say (but, in a letter to *AJODA*, he did say it), no anarchist. AK Press is forever fumbling for his zipper. Churchill always publishes there the books that even other leftist publishers shrink from. He was keynote speaker at the (unofficially) AK-controlled Bay Area Anarchist Bookfair two years ago. When David Horowitz and other right-wingers campaign against campus academic freedom, Exhibit A is always Ward Churchill. Churchill has always had agent provocateur written all over him. That is how many Native American activists regard him. As I once remarked (*AJODA* #46), "You'd have to be awfully stupid, even by lax anarchist standards, not to notice that this guy has always had agent provocateur written all over him." And as Churchill himself once observed in this magazine, you don't have to be an agent to do an agent's work.

Churchill realized and suppressed himself and, if he has handlers, may have made himself too hot to handle with his infamous essay on 9/11. His argument: Everybody who perished at the World Trade Center (including, presumably, the airline passengers) got what they had coming: not just the lawyers and bankers and stockbrokers and (later) the cops, but also the secretaries, the bank tellers, the janitors, the parking lot attendants, and (later) the firemen. The little people were "little Eichmanns." He really said that, although AK calls all of the criticism a "smear campaign" against what were merely "controversial remarks concerning the culpabilities of the functionaries administering U.S. economic and political policies," such as fry cooks and temps. Presumably an employee of the University (and therefore of the State) of Colorado like Churchill does not qualify as such a functionary. Not a few who died that day were nonwhite, unlike Professor Churchill. Rumor has it that, to avoid litigation and further bad publicity, the University is buying out Churchill's tenured position. Rest assured that he will, literally, sell out. AK will hail him as a hero and martyr.

It's not possible to provide even thumbnail reviews of the many AK Press books which no anarchist publisher could possibly publish. The catalog, like the larger selection on the website, consists overwhelmingly of books and other products whose politics are nationalist, liberal, Marxist, social democratic, authoritarian (so-called radical) feminist, liberal feminist, Third Worldist, or racist. AK's relation to Noam Chomsky, as to Chumbawamba, is corrupt. As to them, AK functions as a vanity

press masquerading as an independent publisher. The current, slimmed-down catalog carries 16 Chomsky titles. Most consist of tendentious, repetitive ephemera: speeches and interviews. Churchill is also getting to that point, probably more out of laziness and contempt for his publisher and readers than because of the old age, fatigue, and peevish impatience which noticeably afflict Chomsky, who cannot understand why anyone still disagrees with him about anything.

Chomsky's interview in *AJODA* #29 disclosed how utterly out of touch he is with contemporary anarchism. El Presidente Hugo Chavez (a statist leftist with authoritarian tendencies) may have learned something about US imperialism from Chomsky, as he related to the UN General Assembly, but a lot more people have gotten the same lowdown from Harper's or *The New Yorker*, or from many alternative and small press publications and internet sites. But now we have *Chomsky on Anarchism!* After 40 years, he has outed himself as an anarchist. Who would have ever suspected it? Certainly nobody who read all the Stalinist and nationalist manifestos he signed in full page ads in the *New York Review of Books* (By People Who Write for the *New York Review of Books*).

I mean really, why reprint, from 1970, *At War with Asia: Essays on Indochina*? Is there currently no unpublished anarchist book more worthy of publication by an anarchist publisher? Even AK says it has 20 more titles it would publish next year if it could. C.A.L. Press has several in the pipeline, but lacks for sugar daddies. Chomsky was, and is, like AK Press, an anti-imperialist fellow traveler, a sucker for any Third World authoritarian nationalist gang that seizes state power, or tries to, or wants to.

Or why publish and showcase in the print catalog any book by the unscrupulous manipulator Michael Albert? Especially *Moving Forward: Program for a Participatory Economy* ("Parecon")? AK asks: "If not capitalism, then what?" Albert answers: Capitalism. "The only game in town at the moment," echoes AK. Capitalism is a participatory economy. For most people, their participation assumes the commodity-form of wage-labor. Albert has his own vanity press, South End Press, so why does AK publish him, unless as an affirmation of solidarity with Albert's program of self-managed capitalism (say, sort of like AK Press itself!)? According to Leibnitz's Law of the Identity of Indiscernibles, if every predicate of X is possessed by Y, and every predicate of Y is possessed by X, then X and Y are identical. Let X = AK Press and let Y = South End Press, and it follows that they are identical. Even Albert, who is capable of almost any misrepresentation, isn't impudent enough to claim to be an anarchist.

Two years ago, at a get-together of some of the BASTARD conference organizers, somebody asked, "What does 'para' mean?" in expressions like paralegal, paramedic, etc. Someone else said, "Para means 'something like.'" "So then," I asked, "does Parecon mean 'something like a con?'"

And then there is AK's relation with the late Murray Bookchin, whose books AK cheerfully reprints, years after Bookchin announced that, not only was he not an anarchist, he had never been one – something his many critics had long since demonstrated. This too is likely a corrupt or at least a profit-driven decision. I suspect that Bookchin subsidized these publications; even if he didn't, AK trades on his perceived name recognition, as on Chomsky's. (Bookchin, incidentally, hated Chomsky for being more famous than he was. Chomsky ignored Bookchin.)

In 1995, AK published Bookchin's *Social Anarchism Versus Lifestyle Anarchism*, a senile ostensibly class-struggle diatribe against everything interesting in contemporary anarchism. Including Hakim Bey/Peter Lamborn Wilson (*Immediatism* –

currently reprinted by AK Press!), who was for Bookchin the most decadent of all “lifestyle anarchists,” although Bookchin was too puritanical to mention the biggest reason for his disgust (Bey is an out, proud pedophile). Now AK reprints Bookchin’s 1971 anarchist debut, *Post Scarcity Anarchism*, in its “Working Classic” series no less, oblivious to the fact that this collection absolutely denounced class struggle revolution as passe and irrelevant, for instance, to Paris May/June 1968, which Bookchin falsely claimed to have observed at first hand, and which he diagnosed as a trans-class revolution.

Since AK Press is more of a commercial than a political enterprise, let’s look at how it plays its capitalist game, the only game in town. Although AK is well-capitalized, its books are overpriced – just compare them to the books of C.A.L. Press or Autonomedia, which are without wealthy sponsors, although Bey (of Autonomedia), like Kanaan, may be investing the benefits of family wealth. Nonetheless AK books are, even aside from their content, of poor quality. Their covers are often ugly, including those designed by the “famed,” “renowned” artist Freddie Baer (famed and renowned mainly as a gossip who is no longer spoken to by anybody interesting enough to gossip about). Typos, misspellings and grammatical errors abound. There is usually no index, although with current word-processing technology, it is easy to quickly, easily, and cheaply construct one. AK Press apparently does not edit for content, although it censors for content, as it did the Introduction of *Dreams of Freedom* (see the full version in *AJODA* #62).

Some people may say that, for all its faults, on balance AK Press makes a positive contribution to anarchism, because it occasionally publishes or reprints worthy anarchist books, or at least books worthy of anarchist interest. But it’s not just a matter of more is better. AK Press is not just a poor excuse for an anarchist publisher. It is also a malign influence on genuine anarchist publishing. When AK publishes a poorly produced, badly edited, overpriced edition of even, say, an anarchist classic for which there is only a limited market it effectively precludes any other anarchist or small press or independent publisher from publishing the same book, even if that publisher could have done a better job, and maybe even sold more copies. The Magon anthology *Dreams of Freedom* may be such a book. But some authors would rather be published certainly or sooner, even in a sloppy version, than uncertainly or later. Deceased authors have no say in the matter. But the more books AK publishes, especially since it is also a distributor, the more it consolidates its near hegemony over the publication of anarchist books, although those books are a sideline to its much larger project of leftist publishing.

That business reality may well influence the content of anarchist writing too, in predictably conservative, workerist, social democratic, moralist, and reformist directions. Authors may be writing (or may have already written) with an eye to AK’s obvious predilections. AK Press poses a serious problem, and potentially a crisis, for British and North American revolutionary anarchists. How has this happened? The revival and steady growth of anarchism in the last several decades has made it interesting, not only to the police and the press, but also to leftist ideologues and small-scale venture capitalists, who are sometimes the same (such as Ramsay Kanaan; cf. Caitlin Manning dba *Processed World*). Anarchists think of themselves as a movement, potentially anyway, but capitalists may think of us, not implausibly, as less of a movement than a market.

We would rather think of ourselves as activists than as consumers, but we are consumers all the same, and we will have to consider the challenge of AK Press, which is en route to becoming the Wal-Mart of anarchism. If you really want to buy

an AK Press book, don't waste your money buying it new from AK Press. Although AK pretends to be blackballed by distributors like Amazon.com, that's a flat-out lie. You can even get new AK Press books cheaper there, such as *Chomsky on Anarchism* (\$11.53 vs. \$16.95), *Vision on Fire* (\$12.89 vs. \$18.95), and *Post Scarcity Anarchism* (\$14.78 vs. \$18.95). Better yet, you can get most of them in cheaper used or different (and better) editions. Or soon can. For some reason, I can't imagine why, the market is glutted with previously owned AK Press products. I daresay the Panther video will soon be there at knock-down prices. (And if AK lies about something so easily checked, why believe its claim to be an egalitarian self-managed utopian collective where Kanaan takes his turn mopping the floor and Crusty the bicycle messenger decides what to publish?)

Capitalism may be the only game in town "at the moment," but any number can play. AK Press has laughed off principled criticism throughout its 16 years in the United States. It was imported intact from Scotland by the monied bourgeois workerist Ramsey Kanaan, whose vision, not on fire, merely occluded, remains consistent, in the sense that uncorrected myopia and astigmatism remain consistent. The canny anarchist shopper will not miss out on anything if she takes her business elsewhere. Sooner or later AK's undisclosed inheritances and subsidies will run out, even as its media stars fall dead, dying, or discredited. This strategy has worked before – against Black Rose Books, another pseudo-anarchist publisher of overpriced leftist shoddy, which once had hegemonic aspirations.

The smart money should be put on the post-leftist projects like *AJODA* and C.A.L. Press, not forgetting, among others, *Green Anarchist* (London) and *Green Anarchy* (Eugene), not only as a matter of principle, but as good business too, because, as I have written, with the worldwide collapse of the left, anarchy is the only game in town, if you play for keeps. Or even if you don't.