

Chomsky on Anarchism

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Letter from: Seth Farber

GEORGE FISH'S REVIEW OF *Chomsky on Anarchism* does not serve Chomsky well at all. While Mr. Fish gives a picturesque description of many of the essays in the book there is no indication that he seriously wrestled with Chomsky's ideas on anarchism, socialism, the Russian revolution, the roots of totalitarianism, the vanguard party — the big ideas that Chomsky addresses.

Mr. Fish makes clear from the beginning of the review that he is a Marxist-Leninist and a traditional socialist who does not agree with Chomsky's "basic anarchist premises." Although Fish acknowledges that Chomsky is often "insightful" and "perceptive" and "erudite" and "scholarly" (Fish has a tendency to string synonyms together), he also tells us repeatedly that Chomsky's analysis is a "simplification" or an "over-simplification." (Presumably the latter is even worse than the former.)

But Fish's review is completely evasive. Although he repeatedly asserts the superiority of his Marxist views he never tells us what they are, or makes any effort to show that his Marxist paradigm explains the unexpected trajectory of modern history any better than the anarchist paradigm.

On the other hand, Fish never explains Chomsky's paradigm either. Fish tells us that Chomsky has an "unorthodox notion of anarchism." But he never even hints at what this consists. Fish implies that because Chomsky's anarchism is unorthodox there is much in it that Marxists (like Fish) would "agree with, defend and applaud." But again Fish does not tell us what this is. Fish cites some arguments of Chomsky that he finds convincing, but these do not seem to be integral to Chomsky's unorthodox anarchism — they are at a greater level of generality.

Certainly every leftist activist knows that the most passionate area of disagreement between anarchists and Marxist-Leninists is over the character of the Russian revolution. I looked forward to see how a Marxist sympathetic to anarchism (like Fish is) would refute Chomsky's critique of Marxism and Leninism, Chomsky's argument that Marxist theory is itself responsible for the failure of the workers' revolution. Fish tells us "Chomsky gets simplistic" when he claims Lenin and Trotsky laid "the foundations" for Stalinism. Why is this simplistic? Fish does not say. Nor does he attempt to adumbrate a more complex account. Fish does admit that Chomsky's position on Leninism "while oversimplified... is not without elements of merit [sic]... for revolutionary socialists to consider." But what these elements are, he does not give the reader a clue.

Neither Chomsky nor *New Politics* readers are served well by this review by Fish. Chomsky has formulated a distinctive and "unorthodox" theory of anarchism. If Fish thinks it is simplistic compared to his Marxist perspective then it is his responsibility to demonstrate this to the reader. If Fish is unable to do this, then perhaps Chomsky is not as simplistic as Fish asserts. Perhaps Chomsky has identified some of the flaws in the Leninist and Marxist perspective that Fish is unable to answer.

Repeatedly asserting that Chomsky is simplistic is no way for a "revolutionary socialist" to carry forward the task of political education that Fish asserts is so important. Fish's superficial reading of Chomsky contributes nothing to elucidating and enriching the centuries old debate between anarchists and Marxists. I expected a more enlightening review in *New Politics*.

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