

## Looking back and moving forward The radical humanism of *The Politics of Individualism*

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper the author of *The Politics of Individualism Liberalism: Liberal Feminism and Anarchism* examines the main themes of the work and its relevance and meaning ten years after its initial publication. As the book was originally written as a PhD dissertation, the adversarial nature of the academic milieu and its impact on the author is explored. Also outlined are critical reviews of the work, both positive and negative. The radical humanism of the work is highlighted and reaffirmed. A more collaborative approach to anarchist political strategy is urged.

A decade has passed since *The Politics of Individualism* was first published in 1993 and, as it goes into its second printing, I thought it would be interesting to look back on the book; the impact it made when it was first published and its meaning today. To prepare for this retrospective I re-read the book over the period of a couple of days. As the author, my initial experience of the words was in fact the writing of them, and such writing took place not over days or weeks, but years. So for the first time I have experienced the work as other readers might - as a whole, uninterrupted by the creative struggle of ordering disparate ideas into coherent sentences and paragraphs.

This process has provided me with some distance on the work that I didn't have when I first wrote it, and has allowed me to appreciate more fully the ideas that I developed and put to paper. Writing a sustained work like a book (or, in this case, more properly a thesis, since the book arose out of my doctoral dissertation) requires a deep immersion into the material over a long period of time. Such focused attention can result in an inability to see the work in a broader context. The passage of time has allowed me to see the wider implications of my ideas, implications that were not obvious to me when the book was first published. My own somewhat belated recognition of my book's meaning and relevance is a rewarding experience, invoking feelings of great pride and accomplishment. On the other hand, this re-examination also brings back to me feelings of vulnerability, sadness and hurt related both to the academic context in which I originally wrote my thesis and to some unsettling aspects of the debate that emerged after *The Politics of Individualism* appeared.

The main ideas for the book were developed during my PhD studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The graduate department I was in prided itself on being in the forefront of feminist theory; however, I found myself marginalised as an

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anarcha-feminist. While the feminist content that was being taught was certainly ground-breaking, I see now that the form of this radical content was anything but. The overall tone of intellectual debate was still patriarchal - competitive, adversarial and hierarchical. The only thing that had changed was the orthodoxy: Marxist feminism at first, then post-modernism during the latter years of my study. Although the new feminist ideas (including anarcha-feminism) then emerging were complementary and holistic, a patriarchal culture of ideological competitiveness continued to flourish: combative, black and white, and ultimately marginalising. To be fair, this traditionally male intellectual combativeness was the norm in most other universities of the time; however, it existed in contradiction to the anti-authoritarian feminist pedagogical ideals to which my department was supposedly committed.

So as an anarcha-feminist whose ideas did not easily fit into any of the orthodoxies being taught at the time, I found myself at best alone and at worst attacked. And I gave as good as I got, confronting aggression with aggression when faced with anyone who did not 'get' my anarchist politics, further marginalising myself and my work. Looking back, I am saddened at the missed opportunities during those years; rather than finding encouragement through mentors and colleagues who could support my work without necessarily agreeing with it, I found myself instead for the most part alone and lonely, having to look outside the academy for help and collaboration in the development of my ideas. While I suspect that I was not the only person in the department that experienced this type of alienation, conditions were such that it was difficult for students to come together in any other way than as intellectual foes, each of us positioning for grades, recognition, and intellectual legitimacy.

My thesis defence (even the phrase betrays the adversarial nature of the event) was a trial by fire, in which passing or failing hinged on my ability to defend my belief in the existence of individual free will: the external examiner claimed that the issue of free will had been dead and buried by the post-modernists, so my work was in his view both wrong and irrelevant. In response I took the offensive, arguing that the committee could not fail me simply because of a philosophical disagreement. According to one committee member who spoke to me afterwards, I 'passed by a hair', which was good enough for me to be allowed into that elite club of other poor souls who had both suffered and conquered the power-laden thesis defence committee. That such a process was abusive, inhumane and destructive was not lost on me at the time; however, it is only now, a decade later, that I am starting to see the devastating effects such a hierarchical system of power had on me as an intellectual and as a person.

After my defence I spent some months editing my thesis into book form. I wrote a couple of short articles on the relationship of anarcha-feminism to liberal feminism and on the nature of work in our society, and prefaces to two wonderful books published by my close friend and colleague Thomas S. Martin.<sup>1</sup> During that time I also found myself (along with several other anarchist writers) viciously

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attacked by Murray Bookchin in his book *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*.<sup>2</sup> That he disagreed with my work on a number of points was not of great concern to me; it was not *what* he said but *how* he said it that I found most troubling. As I pointed out in my 1996 article 'A Reply to Murray Bookchin's *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*':

Bookchin does not limit his critique to my writing alone; he couples it with emotionally-loaded words that question my honesty and intellectual integrity as a person. He states that I am 'misguided at best or disingenuous at worst' (SALA, p14), that my thoughts are 'hazy' and based on 'visceral preference' (SALA, p62, fn. 7), that I am 'simplistic' and 'clumsy' (SALA p18) in my thoughts, that I am engaged in 'trendy posturings, nearly all of which follow current yuppie fashions' (SALA, p19), that my 'incredible formulations closely resemble Margaret Thatcher's' (SALA, p15) and that I suffer from 'a positivistic, indeed naïve social myopia' (SALA, p15) among other personal slurs.<sup>3</sup>

It would not be an exaggeration to say that I was blindsided by the viciousness of Bookchin's attack, and the way he used his power as an intellectual leader in the anarchist community to come down hard on those of us who deviated from his line. In some ways, I believe that the disrespect Bookchin has shown me (and other anarchists with whom he disagrees) is a more important issue for the anarchist movement than the mere substance of the debate between us. Given his stature as a prominent figure within the anarchist movement, Bookchin stands as a mentor for many of us, including myself. His vitriolic and hateful attacks act to wound and silence, rather than encourage healthy open discussion. That Janet Biehl justifies Bookchin's tone by stating that he 'is engaged in the movement and its future'<sup>4</sup> is not a sufficient excuse for the abusiveness Bookchin launches at me and others that he characterises as lifestyle anarchists. It must be acknowledged that such viciousness can also be seen from some other anarchists in the movement in their equally abusive counterattacks against Bookchin.. The ends do not justify the means, and I do not believe that the creation of an anarchist world will be built by people who abuse and hurt one another.

After the emotional pounding I took during my PhD studies and thesis defence and the subsequent personal attack that was unleashed against me, I found that I just wasn't into writing about political theory, anarchist or otherwise. While my already-published work was being posted by others on the Internet and translated into a number of different languages, I myself lost the impulse to continue to write intellectual material. As a result of my negative personal experiences, I was hesitant to re-engage in written theoretical debate as I was uncomfortable with the systemic aggressive confrontation that is accepted by many in the intellectual community. Writing this article is one of the few new pieces of anarchist political writing I've done in several years.

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Why have I fled from theoretical writing? I suspect this retreat has been a way of protecting myself from the pervasive patriarchal culture of what passes for intellectual debate but is really only people attacking one other. I don't want to be attacked any more and I certainly don't want to attack others. What I would like to do is engage in healthy, respectful dialogue about important social and political issues. I would like to collaborate with others to try to find new ways of making positive political and social change, ways that empower individuals and celebrate difference. I want to learn how to be so comfortable with myself that it doesn't matter if others disagree with me, and I want others to have the opportunity to do the same. I want to write from a place that integrates my heart with my head, respecting both and privileging neither. While I am still working through this new way of looking at myself, my writing and how best to relate to others, I suspect it is more consistent with anarchist ideals than the more traditional adversarial approach I took when first writing my book. And while my book was written in a traditional style that tends to present my ideas as standing in opposition to others, and presents broad theoretical movements in opposition to each other, I also believe that I made innovative connections between movements, connections that ten years later still speak to some fundamental commonalities between liberalism and anarchism.

I started my journey by noting that some liberal thinkers sound like anarchists in one breath and capitalist apologists in the next. Having originally come to anarchism through Marxism after having rejected my liberal upbringing, it frankly astonished me to then see similarities between anarchism and liberalism. I asked myself why liberals and anarchists are so similar and yet so different. *The Politics of Individualism* is my answer to this question. When I was in the midst of writing, I saw this as primarily a personal voyage and the book simply a travelogue for those who might be thinking of taking a similar trip. Now, however, I see I misjudged the nature of my work (and of the published word more generally), for I forgot the primary lesson given us by the women's liberation movement of the 1960s: the personal is political. Indeed, my work stands as a personal diary of my thought processes. But it also asserts a political imperative about the importance of understanding the human individual as the essential agent in creating a freer world. This fundamental humanism is the wider implication of my work, a political implication of which I originally was unaware.

In my reconsideration of my work I not only see the radical humanism at its core but also the continued relevance of this humanism. It is when the human individual is discounted that atrocities are perpetrated. Palestinian suicide bombings, assassinations of Palestinian leaders by the Israeli military, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, the slaughter in Bosnia and Rwanda, the holy war launched by the United States against the Muslim world: these are only a few examples of the horrific consequences that come from privileging the group over the individual. And if making a link between liberalism and anarchism achieves nothing more than highlighting the need for a more humanist politics in this most inhumane of

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worlds, then I feel I will have made a positive contribution to political theory and practice.

Upon first being published the book received a variety of reviews in both radical and mainstream venues. Some of these were more favourable than others. For example, in *Anarchist Studies* Michael Levin describes *The Politics of Individualism* as ‘a pleasure to read. It is lucid and straightforward; a work accessible to the intelligent beginner and therefore, beyond providing a reasoned case for anarchism, also recommendable as an introduction to both political philosophy and modern political ideologies’.<sup>5</sup> According to Dave Thomson of the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* the book ‘is an academic, eloquent exploration of the philosophical territory encompassing anarchist, feminist and liberal thought. Brown uses words to draw a mental picture of a Venn diagram of political philosophies, to demonstrate their similarities and differences, and to illustrate the significance of points of overlap’.<sup>6</sup> Bill Hulet suggests in *Kick It Over* that ‘one of the refreshing points about [Brown’s] analysis is the fact that it does seem to make sense of a lot of modern history. The rejection of ‘freedom’ by Marxists explains Stalinism as being intrinsic to the whole communist enterprise instead of being an unfortunate historical accident’.<sup>7</sup> Thomas S. Martin comments in *Anarchist Studies*, ‘Brown is correct that a genuine anarchist individualism must look to existentialism for a better model. There is a difference between individualism and selfishness. Capitalism conflates the two, but - argues Brown - we should not’.<sup>8</sup>

Other reviewers cast the work in a less flattering light. Writing in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Ingrid Makus states:

the merit of the book rests in the intention to examine critically liberal feminism and to infuse feminism on the whole with a dose of individualism as a counter to what the author perceives as its overwhelming collectivism. But the kind of “existential individualism” the author finds in anarchism, the kind which focuses on our responsibility for free choice and opposition to all forms of power and authority, comes across as a less than credible alternative.<sup>9</sup>

It is not surprising to me that Makus finds the anarchist vision I advocate in *The Politics of Individualism* to be less than credible; she states earlier on in her review that she is ‘left wondering about the problems that might ensue in designating as inherently oppressive and by implication suggesting the elimination of all forms of work for pay, all forms of contract (marriage or otherwise), all forms of government and all forms of law’.<sup>10</sup> This kind of doubt about the practicality of the anarchist goal of eliminating relationships of domination and subordination faces most if not all anarchists, and is one of our most difficult challenges. It is tempting to dismiss such doubt as ideological in nature, that is, as a result of the dominant (dominating) culture’s systematic and sustained brainwashing that insists that coercion is necessary to orderly social life. However, whether or not such doubt is the result of the dominant ideology’s ability to define what is and is not

possible, anarchism's lack of credibility is one of its greatest weaknesses, and while I have tried to infuse anarchism with possibility and vision, that I may not have been entirely successful does not I hope invalidate the project as a whole.

Mark Kingwell calls *The Politics of Individualism* 'a brisk, neatly argued book that carves out an [sic] compelling version of feminist anarchism'.<sup>11</sup> While Kingwell states that 'there is admirable clarity of vision in these views', he suggests that in the end my analysis falters due to what he sees is my oppositional analysis of individualism and collectivism. Kingwell argues that I do not understand that 'abandoning group membership altogether because some collectives prove tyrannical, is folly'. Neala Schleuning in *Social Anarchism* echoes Kingwell's concerns when she writes, 'In defense of the existential individual, however, Brown goes to extremes to isolate the individual from context, which further weakens her later argument for a "community" of existential individuals. She falls into the same conceptual trap that Max Stirner did'.<sup>12</sup> Finally, Murray Bookchin criticises my conceptualisation of anarchism as fundamentally grounded in the existential individual, and states that I deal 'with the individual ahistorically. She rarefies the individual as a transcendental category'.<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to me that my work has been interpreted by some in this way, for although I focus on individualism (and the individual) throughout my analysis, I reiterate that I am speaking about individuals *within* society, about the expression of 'individual freedom within voluntary community with others'.<sup>14</sup> And while I do critique many collectivists for misunderstanding liberal individualism and for adopting a political philosophy that privileges the group over the individual, I had no intention of positing the human individual in opposition to society.<sup>15</sup> Were I to write the same book today I would perhaps tone down some of the stronger categorical statements I made about the commonality and differences between anarchism and liberalism and the problems associated with collectivism; however, the tendencies that I identified within these movements and my discussion of an underlying individualism within anarchist political philosophy are still, I believe, both valid and useful. Whether this is in fact the case remains for the reader to determine.

The last ten years have convinced me that it is in coming together that we can look forward to a new, freer, world. It is through coalitions, collaborations, partnerships and building bridges both with anarchists and with non-anarchists that new possibilities are born. And with the historic collapse of communism that we have recently witnessed it may well be time to take advantage of the natural alliance between anarchists and liberals, an alliance that exists precisely because liberals and anarchists share a common commitment to the individual. Rather than retreat into a dogmatic anarchist purism that is both isolating and ultimately self-defeating, I believe we need to stretch ourselves and our anarchisms to reach out to others with the same fundamental values. For example, the growing anti-war movement is made up of many different groups and perspectives, some anarchist and others not. As anarchists we can strengthen both the peace movement and our own political agenda by strategically co-operating with others who also emphasise the freedom of the

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individual, whether they are feminists, greens, radical Christians, gay liberationists or classic liberals. We have the opportunity to add our numbers to a larger movement at the same time as influencing that movement with our anarchist values.

We may be on the brink of discovering that oppositional politics leads not to freedom but only to unresolved conflict. The identification of common interests across what might appear to be differing positions holds out a promise of a new political strategy, one that aims at building consensus through honouring difference.

### NOTES

1. L. Susan Brown, 'Water on Fire: The Anarcha-Feminist Challenge to Power Feminism', *Kick It Over*, No. 33, Spring 1994, pp. 8-10; L. Susan Brown, 'Does Work Really Work?', *Kick It Over*, No. 35, Summer 1995, pp. 14-17; L. Susan Brown, 'Commendatory Preface', in *True Whigs and Honest Tories: A Green Interpretation of the Coming of the American Revolution* by Thomas S. Martin (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1997), pp. v-vi; and L. Susan Brown, 'Commendatory Preface', in *Greening the Past: Towards a Social Historical Analysis of History*, by Thomas S. Martin (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1998), pp. iii-iv.
2. Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1995), pp. 13-19.
3. L. Susan Brown, 'A Reply to Murray Bookchin's *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*', *Anarchist Studies* 4, 1996, pp. 140-141.
4. Janet Biehl, 'A Reply to Susan Brown', *Anarchist Studies* 4, 1996, p. 143.
5. Michael Levin, 'The Politics of Individualism by L. Susan Brown', *Anarchist Studies* 3, 1995, p. 90.
6. Dave Thomson, 'Analysing Individualism', *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, April 30, 1994, p. D4.
7. Bill Hulet, 'The Politics of Individualism by L. Susan Brown', *Kick It Over*, Fall 1994, p. 58.
8. Thomas S. Martin, 'Bookchin, Biehl, Brown: An Unbridgeable Chasm?', *Anarchist Studies* 6, 1998, p. 40.
9. Ingrid Makus, 'The Politics of Individualism by L. Susan Brown', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 27, No. 3, September 1994, p. 645.
10. Makus, 'The Politics of Individualism ...', p. 644.
11. Mark Kingwall, 'In Search of a New Liberalism', *The Literary Review of Canada*, May 1995, p. 9.
12. Neala Schleuning, 'The Politics of Individualism by L. Susan Brown', *Social Anarchism* 22, 1996, p. 99.
13. Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, p. 18.
14. L. Susan Brown, *The Politics of Individualism: Liberalism, Liberal Feminism and Anarchism*, Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1993, p. 108.
15. For a more thorough discussion of my reiteration of the need to conceptualise the individual as living within a social context, see Brown, 'A Reply to Murray Bookchin's *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*', pp. 136-142.