

A Critical Consideration of Hensley's Appalachian Anarchism

EF

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In his book *Total Freedom: Toward a Dialectical Libertarianism*, Chris Matthew Sciabarra makes the astute observation that “[j]ust as relations of power operate through ethical, psychological, cultural, political, and economic dimensions, so too the struggle for freedom and individualism depends upon a certain constellation of moral, psychological, and cultural factors.” This is something that Dakota Hensley, in his article “Appalachian Anarchism: What the Voting Record Conceals,” seems to implicitly know but not elaborately understand. Hensley makes four general points: there is an existing culture akin to an explicitly ideological (individualist, Christian, agrarian, and even conservative) anarchism in Appalachia, many parts of the region are already exploring a rejection of government, the region is not truly a “conservative hotbed” as the voting record might indicate, and the area has a strong pro-labor history. Although he makes a compelling case for both an existing and emergent quasi-anarchism within the culture and communities of Appalachia, he fails to critically take into account the counter-liberatory impacts of reactionary cultural elements that would hinder an Appalachian-brand anarchism’s evolution into a genuine part of a common struggle for a truly free society. Therefore, I would like to critically consider and elaborate upon both the liberatory and reactionary components of Hensley’s ideas.

Hensley begins his piece by presenting five values of Appalachia—“[i]ndividualism, community, self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and faith”—within which “we find an anarchism that has existed in the cities and rural communities for decades.” The first four of these values are absolutely central to anarchism and their presence in Appalachian culture is a compelling case for at least the groundwork for an emergent anarchism. And the last of these, faith, is not a necessary element of anarchism—at least in its religious sense—but when interpreted through the lens of Christian anarchism it begins to add up, and Hensley does this. He writes that Appalachian anarchism “is Christian anarchist in that faith is held dear to Appalachians who let the Bible guide them, despite 70% being unchurched and their native Christianity being decentralized and opposed to religious hierarchy and established churches.” This sort of thinking in anarchism absolutely has precedent. Gary Chartier writes in the foreword of Cam Rea’s *God is an Anarchist*,

In the Abrahamic traditions . . . it is clear, for instance, that belief in divine transcendence has undermined the idolization of political authority; that belief in individual

access to God and to divine truth has strengthened belief in the capacity of ordinary people to make their own political decisions; and that Jesus' praise of peace has inspired rejection of state-made wars and the search for a truly consensual society. Religion and authoritarianism may sometimes be allies, but the story is too mixed to make it reasonable to insist that they have to be.

David Fleming, in *Surviving the Future*, makes a compelling case too that makes a compelling case that religious culture—such as Appalachian Christianity—will be a central tool in creating a common context of trust, transparency, congruence, and collective decision making after the failure of the state and the collapse of the capitalist economy. He writes, “Religion provides meeting places in which people can come together building and sustaining friendships of social capital” and...

is the community speaking. It is culture in the service of the community. It is a framework for integrating care into the community’s life and culture; it takes charitable giving beyond the level of personal conscience and integrates it into the way the community sees itself and expresses itself.

He further speaks highly of the proactive proposal, paraphrased from Rabbi Johnathan Sacks, that “the community could start again, inventing its own synthesis of the traditions it has inherited—its own evolved tradition and narrative—helping its members to adapt the cultures they bring with them.”

Ultimately, the sentiments of Christian anarchism are summed up well in Leo Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, wherein he writes on how Christianity applied to the real world takes the form of a rejection of government and violence in general. For example, he writes:

Only because this condition of universal arming and military service has come step by step and imperceptibly, and because for its maintenance the governments employ all means in their power for intimidating, bribing, stupefying, and ravishing men, we do not see the crying contradiction between this condition and those Christian feelings and thoughts, with which all the men of our time are really permeated.

Whether this is this type of peace-oriented sentiment touted by Tolstoy or the potential for the kind of new community religiosity desired by Fleming exist in Appalachia remains to be seen—a proper religious ethnography of the region might be necessary—but faith, particularly the sort of anti-hierarchical kind described by Hensley, can certainly serve to reinforce anarchism (even despite the popular anarchist slogan “no gods, no masters”).

Hensley further describes Appalachian anarchism as “agrarian in its support of the back-to-the-land movement’s components, namely smallholding, self-sufficiency, community, and autonomy,” which need hardly be reconciled with anarchism as numerous anarchists—such as Karl Hess—have supported the American back-to-the-land movement throughout its existence. Sever points out that “[o]ne of the oldest anarchist slogans was ‘Land and Freedom.’ You don’t hear it much anymore these days, but this battle cry was used most fervently in the revolutionary movements in Mexico, Spain, Russia, and Manchuria.” And even further, that “[t]he truth is, the ‘back to the land’ movement and the rural communes of earlier generations, organized according

to a wide variety of strategies of resistance, turned up a body of invaluable experience that anarchists collectively have still failed to absorb.” Perhaps then, explicitly ideological anarchism can learn from Appalachia—particularly the Indigenous peoples of the region who go unmentioned by Hensley—just as the latter can learn from the former.

And Hensley does not remain within the more conceptual realm of general cultural descriptions, but references specific contexts wherein “[m]any [Appalachians] spend their whole lives without interacting with a government or anything close to it” and “[m]any smaller unincorporated communities dot the Appalachian landscape, living peacefully without a local authority.” He presents the cases of Wallins and Harlan, Kentucky, the former of which “doesn’t even have a government (as a result of its being demoted from a city to an unincorporated community back in 2010 after failing to elect a mayor in 2008).” In Harlan there are 62 unincorporated communities where the only real government presence is Harlan Police and the Harlan County Rescue Squad, and in Wallins the volunteer fire department is “as far as government presence goes.” These examples are extremely relevant as they could be written off by non-Appalachians as indicators of ‘backwardness’ or ‘underdevelopment.’ But consider David Graeber’s summary, from *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, of French anthropologist Pierre Clastres’s thought:

[Clastres] insisted political anthropologists had still not completely gotten over the old evolutionist perspectives that saw the state primarily as a more sophisticated form of organization than what had come before; stateless peoples, such as the Amazonian societies Clastres studied, were tacitly assumed not to have attained the level of say, the Aztecs or the Inca. But what if, he proposed, Amazonians were not entirely unaware of what the elementary forms of state power might be like—what it would mean to allow some men to give everyone else orders which could not be questioned, since they were backed up by the threat of force—and were for that very reason determined to ensure such things never came about? What if they considered the fundamental premises of our political science morally objectionable?

Despite acknowledged issues in Clastres’s work, Graeber builds off of this general idea—using examples like the Piaora of the Orinoco, the Tiv of Central Nigeria, the society of Highland Madagascar—to propose that “counterpower” (or “anti-power”—this being, “[i]n typical revolutionary discourse[,] . . . a collection of social institutions set in opposition to the state and capital: from self-governing communities to radical labor unions to popular militias”—need not exist in opposition to an existing state (or market) but can stand in egalitarian societies as “the predominant form of social power. It stands guard over what are seen as certain frightening possibilities within the society itself: notably against the emergence of systematic forms of political or economic dominance.” There would need to be more work on the matter, but perhaps a similar situation is taking place in Appalachia. As Hensley demonstrates, many cultural elements conducive of anarchism exist in the region. So perhaps, say, the loss of a government by Wallins due to its demotion from city to an unincorporated community or, even more so, the continuation of many communities’ unincorporation are themselves very conscious rejections of conventional institutionalized governance.

Finally, in my view, one of the most compelling points Hensley raises regarding anarchist tendencies in Appalachia is the area’s history of pro-labor solidarity. He writes:

Some will assume that Appalachian anarchism can't be anarchism because of anarchism's association with labor. And if we see Appalachia as conservative based on its voting record, that must make it anti-labor as well. That is far from the truth. Appalachia has had labor disputes for decades and its people are always on the side of the worker.

And this is an excellent and important point: Appalachian culture—and consequently an Appalachian anarchism—is deeply intertwined with labor struggle. As historian Elizabeth Catte explains, though the term 'redneck' originated as a derogatory term for poor, uneducated Southerners and Appalachians, the 1921 "Battle of Blair Mountain," a clash between coal miners attempting to unionize and both company enforcers and the National Guard, during which miners wore red bandanas around their neck, marked a "transformation from a more generic epithet to something specific to group identity and union membership, particularly among coal miners, which is built into the way that many folks in Appalachia today reclaim the term." (A good friend of mine carries around a bag with the phrase *Put the "Red" Back in "Redneck"* on it). This history and culture are central to building a more conscious working-class solidarity in Appalachia against attempts to trick rural Americans with racist dog-whistling nationalism. As Daniel Denvir writes, in the preface to his interview with Sarah Jones about Appalachia, that "[n]eoliberalism foments racism by paving the way for right-wing politics that tell white people that people of color are going to steal their share of a shrinking pie. Our response cannot be to write Appalachian folks off; it has to be to build a multiracial working-class movement." And an important element of this is fighting the view of Appalachia as homogenously white (and straight and cisgender for that matter) and recognizing the diversity of the region. As Edward J. Cabell writes, for most of contemporary U.S. history, "[s]tatistical data and published materials [on African-Americans in Appalachia have been] scarce, and the media frequently ignores their experiences." And as a consequence, this...

Black invisibility provides strong support to the myth that the number of black people in the mountains is inconsequential. In reality, [as of the the 1980s,] one out of every fourteen Appalachians is black, and many of these black Appalachians have played important roles in working with whites for improved conditions in the mountains for everyone.

But things have begun to change in the right direction. As Sarah Baird explains for NPR's Code Switch:

While there still is a way to go, a less whitewashed portrait of Appalachia seems to be gaining a foothold nationally, thanks in part to the efforts of scholars and grassroots organizations. The term "Affrilachia" — a portmanteau of "African" and "Appalachian" coined by Kentucky poet laureate Frank X Walker — has brought together a loose collective of multiracial artists previously excluded from conversations about what it means to be an Appalachian.

And never should be forgotten the Indigenous people of Appalachia such as the federally recognized Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina.¹ Furthermore—despite contro-

¹ Note: The author has chosen to remove reference to the "Appalachian Cherokee Nation" on the basis of complaints by members of the Cherokee Identity Protection Committee against said nation for allegedly misrepresenting

versies around its unethical allocation of funds—the network known as Queer Appalachia has, as Elizabeth Catte writes, showcases “that some of the region’s most successful, inclusive, and creative media-makers are queer and trans Appalachians.” Additionally, one study suggests that, despite their underrepresentation in the popular understanding of Appalachian culture, West Virginia has the nation’s highest percentage of transgender-identifying teens and a relatively high percentage of similarly identifying adults. And while outlining some of the non-white, non-settler, and non-cishetero demographics in Appalachia does not come close to ensuring the existence of a truly anti-colonial, anti-racist, working-class ‘rainbow coalition,’ it does at least demonstrate its possibility and therefore the broader possibility of pushing an Appalachian anarchism toward truly liberatory ends.

But while Hensley seems to be attempting to quasi-ethnographically piece together that “certain constellation of moral, psychological, and cultural factors” conducive of “the struggle for freedom and individualism” that Sciabarra describes, he fails to consider the manner in which reactionary cultural elements could potentially get in the way of a truly liberatory anarchist project in Appalachia. The two factors which stand out the most to me are uninformed anti-communism and social conservatism.

As mentioned, one aspect that Hensley attributes to Appalachian anarchism is that “[i]t is individualist in its opposition to communism and acceptance of self-reliance and self-sufficiency.” There is certainly nothing wrong with self-reliance and self-sufficiency, but a staunch anti-communism may be of concern to even the most individualist of anarchists (barring perhaps anarcho-capitalist types). From my experience growing up in southern Ohio on the border of Kentucky, colloquial understandings of ‘communism’ in the rural United States sometimes range from flawed and superficial familiarities with Karl Marx to ‘whatever neoliberal politicians like Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton represent,’ to even somehow what ultraconservatives consider ‘deviancy’ like being gay or transgender (à la cultural Marxism). Hensley sees this problem regarding anarchism itself, writing: “Anarchists forget that the large majority of Americans know nothing about anarchism or the philosophies of Benjamin Tucker and Lysander Spooner, William Greene and Stephen Pearl Andrews, or even Pyotr Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin. The few who do associate it with violence.” However, he fails to make similar observations regarding understandings of communism (and consequently anti-communism).

A sentiment of anti-communism against, say, Stalinism or Juche is nothing to decry, but an uninformed anti-ideological stance could stand in the way of ideas like cooperative ownership, the commons, etc. The latter of these, as Alec MacGillis explains in his review of historian Steven Stoll’s *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia*, was at one time an important cultural aspect of the region. He summarizes how, early in the history of Appalachia, “[s]urvival depended on shared use of the boundless forest beyond one’s own hollow or ridge — the ‘commons’ — for hunting game, raising livestock, small-scale logging and foraging bounties such as uganost (wild greens), toothwort, corn salad and ramps.” This fell apart thanks to the interests of corporate capitalists in the natural resources of the area, but Stoll imagines a “Commons Communities Act,” “under which land would be set aside for shared use, not unlike the great forests of old — farming, timber harvesting, hunting and gathering, vegetable gardening, cattle grazing — by a specified number

or falsifying Cherokee heritage in the pursuit of federal recognition. The author, as a non-Indigenous person, does not feel it is appropriate to voice an opinion on this, but it would be irresponsible to leave it up as is. Amended: 7/24/22.

of families. Residents would own their own homes and could pursue whatever sort of work they cared to beyond their use of the commons.”

A staunch and uninformed anti-communism could be a powerful obstacle for more communitarian initiatives, and furthermore, it could—and has in the past—push rural Americans toward a nationalistic identification over-and-above working-class solidarity and even led to further (particularly anti-Black) racism and antisemitism. As Roberta Wood writes, “The twin themes of anti-communism and racism have been used repeatedly by anti-democratic forces to attack progressive movements and candidates throughout American history. In 2020, just as during the Smith Act trials [of Communist Party leaders] of the 1950s, anti-communism provided a ‘safe space’ for fascist forces to grow and fester.” Consider, as a blunt representation, the infamous protest sign reading “Race Mixing is Communism” at the anti-integration protest in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1959. And Amiad Horowitz records how there is a “long history of the fusing of anti-communism with anti-Semitism that is ingrained in much of American right-wing thought” and “from the moment Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published The Communist Manifesto in 1848, anti-communism has gone hand-in-hand with anti-Semitism. Many of Marx’s enemies (both on the right and the left) used his Jewish heritage to disparage his ideas and followers.” And this has continued through to the present day with the antisemitic trope of ‘Judeo-Bolshevism’ or the constant accusations that George Soros is somehow both a billionaire and a communist who funds Black Lives Matter.

The second issue with Hensley’s Appalachian anarchism is its social conservatism. He asserts “that Appalachia as this conservative hotbed is nothing but a myth,” and that this stereotype is representative of “only those who vote and, even then, their personal views are nothing like the views of the candidates they vote for.” However, southern Ohio and northern Kentucky, for example, are littered with anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ+ signs and Confederate, Blue Lives Matter, and Trump 2020 flags are as common as dirt, which I believe are representative of a culture in largely rural sections of the U.S.—including Appalachia—that is prejudicially traditionalist and reveres both hierarchy and authority. So, to say that there is little non-electoral conservatism is, to me, quite a difficult claim to back up even, as Hensley does, by using voting statistics. And Hensley even identifies Appalachian anarchism as being “traditionalist conservative in its views of social issues, being opposed to abortion and supportive of the traditions of the mountains among others.” And for him this presents no fundamental problem, as he considers in another article,

Can an anarchist be socially conservative? Yes. I see no reason why someone who is anti-abortion or has fundamentalist views on sex or drugs can’t be an anarchist. Anarchism is about building a society in which no one forces their beliefs on others. As long as you respect the views and lives of others, your personal views don’t matter.

Hensley is not highly specific in either article regarding what he means by social conservatism beyond a few name-dropped key issues, so I will function under the definition from RationalWiki which seems the most conventional:

Social conservatism emphasizes convention, morality (or old-fashioned notions of morality) and established roles within society and the family. Social conservatives are often, though not always, strongly religious. They support traditional gender

roles, marriage and “family values” (a term with a multitude of meanings). Social conservatism is often accused of being homophobic, due to its distaste for same-sex marriage and sometimes racist and sexist to some degree because of the associations with traditional hierarchical societies in which everybody knew their place; and in the West, at least, the White, Anglo/European diaspora being regarded as the ultimate origin and standard of civilized culture.

The issue with seeing social conservatism as an acceptable trait in anarchism is, at least as it will be addressed here, twofold. For one it is completely unequipped to address systemic and systematic racism. Appalachia has a history of racial tension—as most areas of the U.S. do—particularly perpetuated by bosses and mass landowners. For example, Kate Aronoff writes how...

[a] favorite and especially nasty tactic used by mine owners around the country was bringing in black (non-union) strikebreakers to keep operations running as the UMWA [United Mine Workers of America] fought for contracts and better wages. The tactic infused existing racial tensions with a deeply felt economic anxiety, leading to outright violence against black miners that often left unaffiliated black families caught in the fray. These strikebreakers were often uninformed or — more likely — deceived about the conditions they were entering, especially in places where there were few other jobs on offer. Many found themselves as cannon fodder in dangerous and often deadly battles between unions and coal operators.

And these strategies continue to be used in contemporary lineages of the infamous Southern Strategy—where right-wing politicians utilize racial anxiety to turn the working class against itself and build loyalty to quasi-fascistic ideas. And racism is obviously a threat to individual freedom, even if it is conventionally ‘nonviolent,’ because it can form what essentially amounts to a conspiracy in the form of systemic racism against BIPOC individuals that limits and sometimes completely deprives them of the resources necessary for survival and flourishing. But furthermore, as Sheldon Richman writes, one important...

libertarian reason to oppose nonviolent racism is that it all too easily metamorphoses from subtle intimidation into outright violence. Even in a culture where racial “places” have long been established by custom and require no coercive enforcement, members of a rising generation will sooner or later defiantly reject their assigned place and demand equality of authority. What happens then? It takes little imagination to envision members of the dominant race — even if they have professed a “thin” libertarianism [which holds that the *only* moral standard for a free society is the non-aggression principle] to that point — turning to physical force to protect their “way of life.”

And, ultimately, any cultural ideology—such as social conservatism in the U.S.—that uncritically accepts nearly all aspects of standard Anglo-American traditionalism, is not in any way prepared to address the racialized elements at its own core.

Social conservatism also creates and maintains communities with anti-abortion, anti-sexualist, harshly-traditionally-familial views that perpetuate patriarchy/cultural misogyny, heteronormativity/homophobia/heterosexism, cisnormativity/transphobia, and so forth. These

are without a doubt—even if they are theoretically completely free of the conventional, physical understanding of violence (which they almost never are)—systems of coercion that can stifle that “certain constellation of moral, psychological, and cultural factors” that “the struggle for freedom and individualism” is dependent on, as Sciabarra maintains. As Marshall Rosenberg accounts,

Most people refer to violence as physically trying to hurt another. We also consider violence any use of power over people, trying to coerce people into doing things. That would include any use of punishment and reward, any use of guilt, shame, duty and obligation. Violence in this larger sense is any use of force to coerce people to do things.

And the rejoinder, as alluded to before, that individuals can just leave those communities that are not tolerant of their existence completely underestimates the power of community and nonphysical social infrastructure in general. This brings up the topic of ‘thick libertarianism,’ which right-libertarian critic of the concept Tom Woods understands as the assertion by some libertarians that one needs “to have left-liberal views on religion, sexual morality, feminism, etc., because reactionary beliefs among the public are also threats to liberty,” but Nathan Goodman more broadly defines as “any broadening of libertarian concerns beyond overt aggression and state power to concern about what cultural and social conditions are most conducive to liberty.” An example case might be Cathy Reisenwitz’s argument that libertarianism should take influence from sex-positive feminism as...

[s]ex-positivity seeks to destroy the judgment and shame which keep people from being able to fully enjoy sex, or a lack of sex, or anything in between. It seeks to allow the greatest amount of peaceful, voluntary sexual exchange. Libertarianism should seek to destroy the judgment and shame which keep people from being able to fully enjoy any kind of peaceful, voluntary exchange. In this way, it will fully engage in creating a world which allows the greatest amount of peaceful, voluntary exchange possible.

In essence, the acceptance of social conservatism—which uncritically advances an Anglo-American traditionalism that, for example, stigmatizes and shames gender and sexual non-conformity, ‘excessive’ sexual activity (generally of women), abortion and contraception, etc.—ultimately creates the cultural conditions through which individual freedom is restricted via coercive social mechanisms such as public shame and unjustifiable hierarchies. And because of this and its inability to address (and, frankly, likelihood to perpetuate) racism, social conservatism, despite Hensley’s assertions otherwise, cannot be systematically tolerated if an Appalachian anarchism is to become a part of a common struggle for human freedom and a truly free society. Anarchism must maintain its commitment to liberation in all spheres of life even (or perhaps particularly) when attempting to call upon elements in existing cultural conditions—such as those in Appalachia.

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