

The official version of anything is most likely false

...and All authority is based on fraud

D.M. Borts

a review of

The Relevance of Rexroth by Ken Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, P.O. Box 1044, Berkeley, CA 94701. 1990. \$5. (Available from FE Books)

Ken Knabb, who in recent years has made available in English a large number of French Situationist texts, has written this 80-page essay on author-poet-translator, Kenneth Rexroth.

Born in Indiana in 1905, Rexroth was orphaned at 12. He was almost totally self-educated and, as a teenager, supported himself working at various farms, forests and ranches in the western U.S. His unusual childhood, education and job experiences fostered a scorn for academia and an antagonism to conventional thinking. As a young man, Rexroth moved from the midwest to California and, except for sojourns in Western Europe and Japan, he lived there until his death in 1982.

Deciding at a young age to commit himself to art and literature, Rexroth was nevertheless deeply concerned with the political and social issues that perturbed 20th century life. He was a Wobbly in the 1920s, a conscientious objector during World War II, a consistent debunker of Bolshevik lies and disciples, and a supporter of the anarchists during the 1936–39 Spanish Revolution.

Rexroth saw through and rejected the social compromises offered by the Roosevelt era New Deal. Here is his assessment of the labor movement:

“The socialist and trade union movements in the West have functioned in reality—not just as governors to insure that steam is let off when the pressure gets too high, not just as what are now called “fail safe” devices, though they certainly are that—but as essential parts of the motive organization of capitalism, more, in other words, like carburetors that insure there will be just the right mixture of fuel and air for each new demand on the engine.”

Ken Knabb sums up the degeneration of Rexroth’s intellectual contemporaries, many of whom had been ardent promoters of socialist and trade union movements: “A whole generation of writers, artists and intellectuals was shell-shocked, mentally and morally maimed, and sunk into demoralization and compromise.” He then offers a fragment of Rexroth’s poem on the same theme.

How many stopped writing at thirty? How many went to work for *Time*?

How many died of prefrontal Lobotomies in the Communist Party?

How many are lost in the back wards of provincial madhouses?

How many on the advice of

Their psychoanalysts, decided

A business career was best after all?

How many are hopeless alcoholics?

In 1946, Rexroth and others in San Francisco organized an anarchist group called the Libertarian Circle. The weekly meetings were like study groups; an aspect of anarchist history was presented by a qualified person and discussions followed. The objective of these meetings was to “refound the radical movement after its destruction by

the Bolsheviks...and to rethink all the basic principles.” Some of the topics chosen to structure the discussions were: the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine, the Kronstadt uprising, the Andalusian peasant communes, Babeuf, Voltairine de Cleyre, Sex & Anarchy. Were these topics discussed anywhere else in this country in the early 1950s?

The numerous quotes Knabb has chosen and merged with his own text convince us of “Rexroth’s gusto, world-wise irony, wry, skeptical down-to-earth outlook.” Knabb insists that Rexroth’s impressive debunking skill was never an end in itself, and points out: “it always took place in the context of a positive vision...he relates to the real human life that goes on behind the facade of the inhuman system:

“Every day all states do things which, if they were the acts of individuals, would lead to summary arrest and often execution...Most people except politicians and authors work out for themselves, in secret, ways of living which ignore organized society as much as possible...What is called ‘growing up,’ ‘getting a little common sense,’ is largely the learning of techniques for outwitting the more destructive forces at large in the social order. The mature man lives quietly, does good privately, assumes personal responsibility for his actions, treats others with friendliness and courtesy, finds mischief boring and keeps out of it. Without this hidden conspiracy of good will society would not endure an hour.”

In the concluding pages, Knabb points out what he considers shortcomings of Rexroth’s political perspective: he lacked a strategy for social change; his empirical eclecticism failed to address new tactical and theoretical questions posed by the contestations which occurred in the 1960s; his merely “vague hope that...people quietly practicing authentic community in the interstices of the doomed system might somehow keep the flame alive.”

Knabb’s essay brought up several things about Rexroth that surprised me. I had considered Rexroth a forerunner of the Beat generation writers and had assumed he would be an admirer of Kerouac and other Beat authors, but I learned that this was far from the truth. I also learned that Rexroth had more enthusiasm for the May 1968 uprisings in France and for the Montgomery bus boycott than for student protests around the U.S. or for using drugs to induce insights.

I was correct in my view of Rexroth as a translator of Eastern poetry—and to some extent an interpreter of Eastern philosophy—but learned that he was no advocate of a blind acceptance of an oriental outlook. Rexroth, according to Knabb, “granted that Zen meditation is one of the most effective ways to cultivate the peace of contemplation ‘until it becomes a constant habit in the background of daily life.’ But he seemed to feel that too urgent a striving for enlightenment may miss the point. Buddha’s last words are said to have been: ‘The combinations of the world are unstable by nature. Monks, strive without ceasing.’ Rexroth, in a more Taoist frame of mind, advises:

“The combinations of the world
are unstable
By nature. Take it easy.”

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