

Reviews

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***Oystercatcher #5* Review by J.L. Dale**

I'm young, but I still had grade-school fantasies about bathing my neighborhood in a heavy wave of pirate radio—my voice and my songs out into the world.

So, I respect a man that can keep that way of thinking alive. *The Oystercatcher #5*, edited by Ron Sakolsky, though rather diverse in content and forms, keeps a strong, unified voice. Each piece is well edited and laid out nicely, taking advantage of *The Oystercatcher's* full-size format.

Most 'zine editors would likely decide they required something in every conceivable field, but Sakolsky finds a beauty in space. Almost as the ever-important absence of the jazz note, the blank areas let the works breathe, giving them room to stand on their own, without the need of trite redundancies. What needs to be said is said; no more, no less. Even the images seem tight and poignant, but minimal in size.

Though the 'zine presents content that is serious in tone, the glass is never half empty. There is a certain hope to be found, whether it's in the escapist attitude of Sun Ra, the work ethic of the mudgirls, the hardships of indigenous people in the face of conservation formation, or the riotous seventies in Vancouver.

Honestly, though, any zine that can use nature and its creatures to alter our social perspective earns my praise, automatically. This 'zine is a cohesive collection, a bountiful horn of fresh thought to carry you onward, with the knowledge of love and hope for a future that is fully aware of the past.

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A Game of War

Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord

Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. Atlas Press, 2007

Review by Don LaCoss



ALICE BECKER-RO & GUY DEBORD

A Game of War

TRANSLATED BY CHARLES HOOPER-DEEDS

Titles put out by the British publisher Atlas Press are always worth a look—they take seriously the business of recirculating new English-language translations of key avant-garde, counter-cultural, and underground texts from the last 100 years.

The Atlas version of Situationists Alice Becker-Ho and Guy Debord's *A Game of War* is an attractive package; in addition to offering an instruction manual for the game, Atlas also carefully produced a board and pieces (representing forts, field artillery, cavalry, and arsenals) and fit them all into a slim, portable box. All that's missing for two-person play are dice. Debord wrote that, once you've figured out how to play, the average game runs between 100 and 120 minutes. The objective is to defeat your opponent's army.

The book also contains brief introductory remarks, some additional explanatory diagrams, a re-creation of a game played between Becker-Ho and Debord with running commentary, and some random fragments found in Debord's notebooks about the game itself. The translation is a little cleaner than the previous one by Len Bracken in the appendix to his spirited critical biography of Debord (1997), but that's a minor point, really. (And actually, Bracken's version invites more of a do-it-yourself approach to the gameboard and pieces than the templates that Atlas has provided).

All told, this is a lovely object, but not a very interesting read. And I have reservations about the game itself...frankly, I had no desire to play it. Debord notes that he wanted this game to "imitate the combat factor" of poker while removing the role of chance. But it's just not fun.

Debord first devised his *Game of War* in the mid-1950s and patented it ten years later. In 1977, after entering into a partnership with Gerard Lebovici in his ultra-left Editions Champ Libre publishing house, Debord created a small company called the "Strategic and Historic Game Society" to print up the instruction manual for *Game of War* and to produce limited edition versions of the game board (18" x 14," about half the size of the board provided by Atlas) and engraved silver-plated copper game pieces. The Atlas Press edition is based on a 1987 version that was pulped in 1991, three years before Debord killed himself.

Any theoretical Situationist reflection on the game's meanings or intentions seem to be deliberately left out of the instruction manual by its creator; in the very brief preface to that edition, Debord acknowledges only the value of Becker-Ho's contributions to the game described in the book and stresses that it is the playing of the game, not the book, that is most important. He was a bit more forthcoming about *Game of War* in his last two major books, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988) and *Panegyric* (1989); he wrote in the latter book that he "drew a few life lessons" from playing the game, though "whether I have made good use of those lessons is for others to judge." He admits there also his "fear that it [*Game of War*] may turn out to be the only one of my works that people will venture to accord any value."

Debord's game is derived from military theories concocted during the Napoleonic Wars by Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831). Clausewitz was a major-general in the army of the Kingdom of Prussia that invaded Revolutionary France in hopes of restoring an absolute monarch to government, and he later saw combat during the Napoleonic Wars as personal secretary to Prussian Prince August Ferdinand at the Battle of Jena and Auerstedt.

He joined the Imperial Russian Army to continue the fight against the French and was an architect of the international reactionary monarchist coalition (Prussia, Britain, and Russia) that finally defeated Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815. When not on the battlefield, Clausewitz fought tirelessly to modernize military instruction and to augment the powers of the Prussian state.

He is best known as a military philosopher and strategist, and his posthumously-published *On War* (1832) is a classic of the Western military theory canon and has been read, scrutinized, and argued in military academies around the world for the last 175 years—most of the carnage of the First and Second World Wars are often explained as the result of military planners' poor understanding of Clausewitz's Kantian grasp of tactics and strategy.

In other words, Clausewitz and his intellectual legacy are practically everything that has deeply disgusted anarchists for the better part of two centuries: war, military discipline, authoritarian regimes, flags for god and country, and all that other trash. This is why I never understood why the Situationists were such fanboys of Clausewitz. I can think of nothing less revolutionary (let me re-phrase that: "nothing more counterrevolutionary") than Clausewitz. Why would I take the time to learn his obsolescent philosophy of war?

For the longest time, I gave Debord the credit of a doubt with *Game of War* and imagined it to be some sublime, supremely allegorical meditation exercise on revolutionary struggle that I would never be able to figure out. But

ultimately I came away feeling like this was some sort of creepy war-geek porn of the kind that one finds among Civil War re-enactors and enthusiasts of multiplayer online real-time strategy game franchises. Playing the Milton Bradley Company's *Stratego* boardgame as a kid was more fun. I'll stick to poker.

***In Defense of Lost Causes* by Slavoj Zizek; Verso, London, 2008, 208 pp.**

Review by John Brinker

Those of you who follow the latest trends in critical theory will have heard of Slavoj Zizek by now. Zizek is a current darling of philosophy mavens and campus intellectuals around the world; his speaking engagements regularly sell out, he is the subject of a documentary (*Zizek!*), and even has a nightclub in Buenos Aires named for him. One suspects a musical based on his writings is already in pre-production.

Perhaps the rockstar appeal is that Zizek, while he's as abstruse as they come, has a talent for using pop culture—especially Hollywood—to illustrate knotty philosophical concepts, and for using blacker-than-black Soviet-block humor to sweeten the punch. Zizek also gives voice to the kind of anti-politically-correct stance that reigns in the world of stand-up comedy these days; he loves to shock his audience, but always with the wink of an entertainer. His digressive style gives the impression of a restless and wide-ranging intellect, one that has not only mastered western philosophy the way an evangelist masters the gospels, but also huge swaths of literature, film, music, and history.

In his latest (and longest-ever) book, Zizek marshals his formidable intellect in the service of a “lost cause” near and dear to our hearts: the revolution. It's good to see such a great mind taking the revo so seriously, and there are some fresh angles here that make the book an immensely worthwhile read. The sinking feeling sets in once it's clear what kind of revolution he supports: seizure of state power by a dictatorship of the proletariat, led by an autocratic father-figure.

Zizek's role as the avatar and interpreter of psychoanalytic philosopher Jacques Lacan might explain how he has stumbled into this dead-end. While he supported their cause, Lacan told students who had seized the Sorbonne in '68, “you demand a new master. You will get it!” It is precisely the figure of the “master,” embodied by none less than Stalin, that Zizek demands on our behalf. The problem with the psychoanalytic frame used here is that it takes as given and eternal some of the worst aspects of human behavior (like authoritarianism) and assumes that they must be projected into the political domain, rather than imagining a reciprocity between the political and psychological in which we can change our “inner” selves through “outer” praxis. The leaps by which Zizek reaches his conclusions for the state and autocracy are accompanied not only by Lacanian terminology that will be unfamiliar to most readers, but also by fuzzy mysticism: a leader will represent the true will of the people by a process of “transubstantiation;” the revolution will happen by “magic.”

When it comes to the question of the state, Zizek appears to endorse two different positions. In his discussion of Simon Critchley and John Holloway—both of whom advocate withdrawing from direct confrontation with the state—Zizek suggests that, to the extent that the anarchist role is that of the loyal opposition, we are in fact helping the state to function more smoothly by pointing out its susceptibilities. Drawing both on Critchley and Alain Badiou, Zizek elaborates on a strategy of “subtraction,” whereby a revolutionary movement withdraws itself from the entire field of state/anti-state power in such a way as to “denaturalize” that field of power. Here, he echoes the anarchist stance of refusal, while giving it a new dialectical twist.

Setting aside this tantalizing line of thought, Zizek ultimately reaches the conclusion that the state is here to stay, and that rather than letting “someone else assume the task of running the state machinery,” we should do it ourselves. Tellingly, here Zizek cites no clear justification for his reasoning: he tells us neither why he thinks the state is here to stay, nor why we should run it. As for who “we” are that are supposed to operate this heavy machinery, Zizek nominates the proletariat (of course!), who he suggests may now be comprised of slum dwellers and their allies in the “symbolic class” (intellectuals and academics). A far-fetched alliance, and presumably one in which the academics like Zizek would claim the role of the “vanguard.”

Despite these obvious missteps, the book offers up a feast of ideas presented with the flair of a showman. *In Defense of Lost Causes* is a kind of thriller, since you don't know whether you're about to get a page of mind-bending Hegelian theory, witty aphorism, or egotistical polemic. It's tragic that all of this great rhetoric paves the way for the defense of the worst criminals in history, and call to repeat their betrayals of humanity. But, while this book's

conclusions should be scorned by anyone serious about making egalitarian revolution, the labyrinthine path Zizek takes to get there offers dozens of striking views worth taking in.

Vindicating Classical Anarchism: Free Comrades: Anarchism and Homosexuality in the United States, 1895–1917

Terence Kissack (AK Press, 2008)

Review by Spencer Sunshine

For me, Terence Kissack's *Free Comrades* comes as a long-overdue vindication of the classical anarchist tradition and its politics of liberation.

During the 1990s many anarchists, especially those around the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, claimed that classical anarchism (the period from 1840 to 1940) did not adequately address concerns of race, gender, or sexuality.

Therefore, they argued, radicals interested in identity politics should abandon anarchism; in fact, many of them did and became Third World Marxists. Interestingly, their arguments were mirrored by their opponents, work-erists like anarcho-communists and anarcho-syndicalists. They also claimed that classical anarchism did not have much interest in these matters, as it was exclusively focused on organizing the working class into seizing the economy.

I always felt that these claims did not make sense, although I did not have access to the historical knowledge to disprove them. Kissack's long-overdue book shows how both of these sides were wrong and furthermore illustrates classical anarchism's commitment to a wide-ranging program of liberation.

Kissack shows that not only did US anarchists champion queer liberation in the period from the mid-1890s to the 1920s, but he argues that they were the only political group to do so. He writes that:

"Beginning in the mid-1890s, leading anarchist sex radicals began to actively defend the rights of men and women to love members of their own sex. Homosexuality became one of the topics that the anarchist sex radicals devoted considerable attention to. No other Americans—outside of the medical, legal, and religious professions—devoted so much time and effort to exploring the social, moral and ethical place of same-sex love. And neither did anyone else of the period develop a political understanding of the right of men and women to love whomsoever they wished, whenever and wherever they wished, in a manner of their choosing."

Having said this, Kissack spends most of *Free Comrades* (originally his PhD dissertation) giving scholarly examples to back this claim up. Although there were problematic attitudes among anarchists towards queer sexuality at the beginning of the movement (P.J. Proudhon, Johann Most, and Peter Kropotkin in particular), the trial of writer Oscar Wilde in 1895 changed this.

Not only did anarchists publicly defend Wilde, they were "nearly alone among their contemporaries" in doing so.

Some of the examples he includes are the individualist Benjamin Tucker, who defended Wilde and promoted his work; Emma Goldman, who lectured on same-sex desire and was in close contact with the leading sexologists of her day; Alexander Berkman, who painted a sympathetic description of same-sex relations in prison in his *Prison Memoirs*; Walt Whitman's admirer John William Lloyd; as well as others such as John Henry Mackay, Ben Reitman, Jan Gay, and poet Elsa Gidlow.

Kissack notes that queer-positive anarchism was strongest among native-born, middle-class anarchists (and especially among individualists) compared to working class, immigrant anarchists (especially anarcho-communists). While his portrayal of the ideological differences between individualist and communist anarchists is adequate, he tends to speak of them as unproblematically belonging to the same tradition and does not do much to position these sexual politics amongst the fractures within those who all called themselves anarchists.

The book ends on a poor note. While Kissack's historical knowledge of queer politics is quite thorough, his understanding of contemporary anarchism—and especially its relationship to queer politics—is passing at best. Clearly the editors at AK were soundly asleep at the wheel to allow such a shoddy treatment of contemporary anarchism to go into print.

While Kissack acknowledges that the classical anarchist movement has little influence on mainstream GLBT politics today, he does not even touch on the huge revival of queer anarchist politics, even in obvious forms such as its influence on the contemporary trans movement, Radical Fairies, ACT-UP, Queer Nation, the Radical Homosexual Agenda, Radical Cheerleaders, etc.

Nonetheless, *Free Comrades* hopefully will encourage an understanding of anarchism that sees queer liberation both as an essential part of its message and one which has long been a part of its past.

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