

Preface to The Right to be Greedy by “For Ourselves”

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Preface to the Preface

I was never a member of For Ourselves, the San Francisco Bay Area pro-situationist group which wrote and self-published *The Right to Be Greedy* in 1974. The principal author was Bruce Gardner, who has long since dropped out of sight. I came across the pamphlet a couple of years later, by which time For Ourselves was defunct. I was charmed and challenged by its “communist egoism,” its audacious attempt to synthesize a collectivist social vision of left-wing origin with an individualistic (for lack of a better word) ethic usually articulated on the right.

I was coming from the New Left of the 60’s, but I was increasingly disgruntled with the left of the 70’s. It retained or exaggerated all the faults of the 60’s left (such as current-events myopia, theoretical incoherence, historical amnesia and – especially – the cult of the victim) while denying or diminishing its merits, among them a sense of revolution against the totality, a sense of verve and vitality, and a sense of humor. The left demanded more sacrifice and promised less satisfaction, as if there was not already too much sacrifice and too little satisfaction. I began to wonder whether the failure of the left to root itself in a substantial social base, or even to hold on to much of what base it once had (mostly on campus, and among the intelligentsia, and in the counter-culture), might not in part derive from its own deficiencies, and not only from government repression and manipulation. Maybe the leftists were not so smart or the masses so stupid after all. Guilt-tripping might not go over very well with ordinary people who know they are too powerless to be too guilty of anything. Demands for sacrifice lack appeal for those who have already sacrificed, and been sacrificed, too much and for too long. The future promised by the left looked to be – at worst, even worse – and at best, not noticeably better than the status quo. Why rush to the barricades or, for that matter, why even bother to vote?

More or less in isolation, I sought out currents which were more liberatory, more libertarian, and more libertine. I discovered, among others, the situationists. In Raoul Vaneigem’s *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, especially, I found a congenial concept of “radical subjectivity” offering some promise of a revolutionary transcendence of moralism. *The Right to Be Greedy* further developed this dimension of the revolution of everyday life, the only revolution that matters.

The circumstances in which I brought about the reprinting of *The Right to Be Greedy* explain a few of my *Preface*’s peculiarities. In the early 1980’s I got to be in contact with publisher Mike Hoy of Loompanics Unlimited. Hoy came out of an extreme right-wing background to get involved in the libertarian movement. There too he staked out an extreme position as an amoral egoist anarcho-capitalist: Loompanics, he boasted, was “the lunatic fringe of the libertarian movement.” By the time I happened by, Hoy was beginning to find even that position restrictive. By then Hoy and I both thought of ourselves as egoists, but from that we drew very different political conclusions. In fall 1982, as a lark, I sent *Greedy* to Hoy, saying something to the effect of – you think you’re an egoist? Try this on for size. Months passed, I heard nothing from Hoy, I forgot all about it. Then in February 1983 he wrote in to say that the Loompanics reprint of *Greedy* has been typeset and would you please provide a Preface within a few days?

So I did. I slanted it toward a mostly libertarian or apolitical readership which, I could safely assume, knew nothing about the situationists or their predecessors such as dada, surrealism, and lettrism. I did the very little I could, in a very small space, to supply a little context and forewarning. I even tried a bit of cross-ideological outreach, as when I suggested that the communist egoism of For Ourselves involved “multiplier effects” – a technical term from economics which libertarians should be familiar with. Anarcho-leftists who are, almost without exception, ignorant

of the neo-classical microeconomics to which they object, sometimes stumbled over the phrase. Had I written a Preface for them, it would have been different.

The Preface

Most libertarians think of themselves as in some sense egoists. If they believe in rights, they believe these rights belong to them as individuals. If not, they nonetheless look to themselves and others as so many individuals possessed of power to be reckoned with. Either way, they assume that the opposite of egoism is altruism. The altruists, Christian or Maoist, agree. A cozy accommodation; and, I submit, a suspicious one. What if this antagonistic interdependence, this reciprocal reliance reflects and conceals an accord? Could egoism be altruism's loyal opposition?

Yes, according to the authors of this text. What's more, they insist that an egoism which knows itself and refuses every limit to its own realization is communism. Altruism and (narrow) egoism or egotism they disparage as competing and complementary moralisms in service to capital and the state. They urge us to indulge a generous and expansive greed which goes beyond self-sacrifice and petty selfishness to encompass the appropriation of everything and everyone by each and all of us. "Wealth is other people," wrote Ruskin. The radically and rationally (self)-conscious egoist, appreciating this, enriches him-self in and through other subjectivities. In social life at its (con)sensual and satisfying best — sex, conversation, creation — taking from and giving to others constitute a single play-activity rich with multiplier effects. For the lucid and ludic egoist, anything less than generalized egoism is just not enough.

The individualists have only worshipped their whims. The point, however, is to live them.

Is this a put-on, a piece of parlor preciosity? There is more than a touch of that here. Or a mushminded exercise in incongruous eclecticism? The individualist egoist is bound to be skeptical, but he should not be too quick to deprive himself of the insights (and the entertainment!) of this unique challenge to his certitudes. The contradictions are obvious, but whether they derive from the authors' irrationality or from their fidelity to the real quality of lived experience is not so easy to say. If "Marxism-Stirnerism" is conceivable, every orthodoxy prating of freedom or liberation is called into question, anarchism included. The only reason to read this book, as its authors would be the first to agree, is for what you can get out of it.

At least for those not conversant with Hegelian Marxism, "critical theory," and the latest French fashions in avant-garde discourse, the mode of expression in this work may seem unusual. But it's very much in the tradition of those (mainly European) oppositional currents — such as dada and surrealism — which tried to combine political and cultural iconoclasm. In the late 1950's, a small French-based but international organization called the Situationist International resumed this project at a high level of intransigence and sophistication.

The situationist drew attention to the way the "spectacle" of modern capitalism (including its Leninist variants), the organization of appearances, interposes itself between isolated and enervated "individuals" and a world which they produce by their activity but neither control nor comprehend. Mediation supplants direct experience as the fragmentation of daily life into so many standardized prefab roles produces individuals with a dazzling array of forced "choices" but drained of effective autonomy by the loss of initiative to create their own lives. Politically, the situationists bitterly denounced the established left, but moved toward an ultra-left stance themselves when they embraced council communism. Calling for the abolition of work — it

transformation into productive playlike pastimes — on the one hand, and for workers' councils, on the other, is only one of the contradictions which the sists failed to resolve. The French general strike of 1968 vindicated the sists' thesis that the affluent society had merely modernized poverty, and even showcased a number of their slogans, but the S.I. was at a loss what to do next and broke up in 1972.

Ever since, situationist ideas — and poses — have percolated into popular culture, and the Sex Pistols' manager Malcolm McLaren was perhaps the first to sell a denatured situationism to the trendies. In the early 1970's, "pro-situ" groups (as they are known) formed in Britain, New York City and especially in the San Francisco Bay Area. One of these groups, Negation, reformed as For Ourselves around 1973, and by the following Mayday produced the present text. For Ourselves was particularly beholden to the situationist Raoul Vaneigem whose celebration of the "radical subjectivity" of "masters without slaves" figures prominently in the theory espoused in *The Right to Be Greedy*. All too soon the group collapsed, some of its members regressing into Marxism from which they had never really escaped.

The text manages to be at once too Marxist and oblivious to the extent of its incompatibility with Marxism. Too Marxist, in that the illusion of Man as essentially producer persists, and a "democratically" planned economy based on the councils is touted as the structural basis of a new and free society. And too enamored of Marxism in that the attempt to square communism egoism with the Marxist scriptures is far more ingenious than persuasive — though perhaps it does show that Marx was more radical than he himself supposed. It's a pity For Ourselves didn't try to Marxize Stirner as it Stirnerized Marx: then we might have a better sense of the level at which it just might be possible to harmonize the two great revolutionary amoralists.

Egoism in its narrowest sense is a tautology, not a tactic. Adolescents of all ages who triumphantly trumpet that "everyone is selfish," as if they'd made a factual discovery about the world, only show that they literally don't know what they're talking about. Practical egoism must be something more, it must tell the egoist something useful about himself and other selves which will make a difference in his life (and, as it happens, theirs). My want, needs, desires, whims — call them what you will — extend the ego, which is my-self purposively acting, out where the other selves await me. If I deal with them, as the economists say, "at arm's length," I can't get as close as I need to for so much of what I want. At any rate, no "spook," no ideology is going to get in my way. Do you have ideas, or do ideas have you?

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