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Enemies of Society: An Anthology of Individualist and Egoist Thought

reviewed by Lawrence Jarach

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2011

Enemies of Society: An Anthology of Individualist and Egoist Thought

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Anarchists are opposed to authority both from below and from above. They do not demand power for the masses, but seek to destroy all power and to decompose these masses into individuals who are masters of their own lives... Anarchy is the aggregation of innumerable and varied forms of life lived in solitude or in free association... It is not by organizing into parties that one struggles for anarchy, nor by mass action which, as has been

shown, overthrows one barracks only to create another. It is by the revolt of individuals alone or in small groups, who oppose society, impede its functioning and cause its disintegration.

“In Praise of Chaos” by Enzo Martucci

This book is designed to provoke its readers, to bring our awareness to the egoist side of the anarchist family tree, an insistently forceful elbowing past the Leftist gatekeepers into the festivities. The individualists and egoists featured in this volume are an indisputable part of the actual real anarchist tradition — whether other anarchists like it or not. As impertinent as an unwanted guest, the authors featured in *EoS* may be frequently annoying (the constant presence of a rather arrogant and obnoxious S. E. Parker — who eventually abandoned his adherence to anarchism — begins to grate even after only three or four entries). Perhaps as part of the provocation, the editor should have included a Parental Advisory or a Trigger Warning along these lines: “The essays, reviews, and biographies that make up this anthology may alternately or simultaneously induce horror, defensiveness, rage, confusion, frustration, and/or agreement.”

If this book wasn't written as a defiant response to the ahistorical, insulting, retrograde *Black Flame* (see review in #68/69), it should have been. The authors of *BF* invented the Broad Anarchist Tradition™ (in a transparently Orwellian manner, by *confining* their definition of anarchism to be merely a form of syndicalism), and inducted such obviously absurd figures as self-identified Marxists like the Irish nationalist James Connolly and the founder/lifetime leader of the US-based Socialist Labor Party Daniel DeLeon at the same time as they pared it down to exclude Pierre-Joseph Proudhon — love him or hate him, he was the first person who proudly called himself an anarchist. And of course they excluded the bogeyman of all

leftist ideologues, Max Stirner; the editor of *EoS* has taken it upon her_himself to make sure that nobody can do that in the future without comment.

The editor of *Enemies of Society* has taken the deliberate path of opening up a long-neglected and deliberately invisibilized aspect of anarchist thought to a modern readership. From the introduction:

As a philosophical weapon, anarchist thought has become dull, has lost its once-lethal edge and become encrusted with leftist clichés. One of the purposes of compiling these outsider voices is to help relieve anti-authoritarians of the burden of carrying the impossible load of universal emancipation (this leftist ideal of herd-life that undermines our individual strength) and to help re-awaken the slumbering dragon of insurrectionary egoism. These are the voices of uncompromising individualists, to whom no topic is taboo or off-limits, voices that have stayed obscure until now, but for which the myriad complexities of our current era provide an excellent context for a re-appearance. What ultimately emerges from these writings is a vision of anarchy that is non-utopian, non-idealist, and decidedly non-leftist, a vision of anarchy that could accurately be described as anti-social, or at least *socially pessimistic*... Any sketches of an anarchistic future they offer are apparent only by inference. (xxiii)

The term “individualism” has several different meanings in an anarchist context, depending on who’s using it, and whether it’s being used to score rhetorical points against a rival (or group of rivals) or as a self-description, whether as an insult or as a marker of friendly complicity. In the English-speaking world, following the Enlightened Liberal tradition of Mills and Locke, Individualism more often than not signifies a philosophical position gravitating toward the support of private property and commerce. *Enemies of Society* reminds readers that this was not always the case, as when Benjamin Tucker, whose shadow (through numerous essays that originally appeared in

his long-running journal *Liberty*) looms over the contributions in this anthology while never making his way into it, called himself an Individualist and a Socialist.

Too often, the term has been used as a dismissal, aimed at any anarchist (or group of anarchists) who don't happen to want to be in the same organization as the one(s) doing the dismissing. Most notably, during the experiments in collectivization that occurred during the Spanish Revolution, anyone (anarchist or not) who was skeptical of the process or outright refused to join a collective was labeled an "individualist" regardless of any particular stance toward private property or capitalism. Much depended on which union was carrying out the collectivization (besides the more well-known of the anarchosyndicalist CNT, the socialist UGT and the anti-Stalinist POUM/FOUS experimented with forms of workers' self-management); a sympathy for some form of socialism might keep that person out of a CNT-organized collective, and vice versa. This sort of automatic and casual hostility toward organizational non-conformity should not sit well with any consistent and honest anarchist. Indeed it only tends to confirm what many anarchists who were skeptical of the CNT suspected all along: namely that the CNT, because of its inherent organizational structures (coupled with the ideological confines of syndicalism), was destined to become a conservative, bureaucratic, and ultimately authoritarian outfit.

When the term was used as a self-description outside an Anglo-American context, there was a propensity for celebrating (when not embracing it as a principle) what came to be called illegalism: a life dedicated to survival without relying on wage-labor or charity. Yet individualists weren't ever the only ones who planned and participated in forgery, burglary, assassination, and other activities deemed unsavory by anarchists yearning for respectability. During the years the CNT was outlawed, many of its more dedicated activists and organizers — Durruti, most famously — engaged in them as well.

everyone knows she probably should have been invited (if only to avoid a bigger and more embarrassing scandal), but she's just so boorish, so impolite, so... exasperating. As the host, all you can do is shake your head at the futility of having tried to keep her from attending.

That said, unlike too many (hyper)social anarchists who apparently are so hungry to accept a mass-orientation for their brand of anarchism that they continuously fall victim to the temptation, I refuse to impute exclusive, predominant, or even a minority anarchist content to the ideas and practices of the EZLN, the *piqueteros* of Argentina, people involved in the Occupy phenomenon, the mutinous sailors of Kronstadt, or the Paris Communards. This is not to say that anarchists in general, and this one in particular, do not find anything of value in their struggles just because most of them didn't use the label I (reluctantly) choose for myself. Quite the opposite! What many left anarchists hear when someone makes such an observation isn't "They aren't anarchist," but "Anarchists should not support those struggles that aren't anarchist."

This constant confusion of form with function gets really old. Even so, I understand at least a little of why it continues to influence the organizational wing of Anglophone anarchism; an unsophisticated theoretical understanding of anarchism proper is definitely part of it, but it is often coupled with a desperate yearning for more members/cadre to whatever outfit they're trying to make more relevant. This allows them to see anarchists — or at least potential members/cadre — everywhere. Anarcho-leftists are not alone in this, but they do seem to engage in such silliness more than other kinds of anarchists. Using a radical organizational form (non-, or minimally, representational assemblies for example) has never guaranteed a radical content. I still recognize the capacity of people who haven't been particularly engaged in any sort of politics to discover on their own (and perhaps with a little help from uncondescending radicals) the self-organizational forms of decision-making and decision-implementation that anarchists have always held up as positive examples, but which anarchists did not invent.

Enemies of Society is an unwanted guest crashing your formal dinner party. Given that she's a close relative of the hosts,

Perhaps, a principled organizational anarchist might think, the distinction is that the CNT bandits gave all their loot (after expenses) to the Cause, the Organization, while those unwashed individualist criminals kept it all for themselves. This doesn't explain how or why almost all the French anarchist press of the day (individualist *and* other) was financed by Marius Jacob and The Bonnot Gang.

Some individualist anarchists accept the way things are, some do not; the latter are the activists and interventionists while the former are the finger-waggers. There's often no love lost between them, which is part of the entertainment of reading different individualists from each tendency in the same volume. The Italians especially figure prominently among the active antagonists of the social order, the staunchest anti-capitalists: my favorite contributor is definitely Enzo Martucci (1904–75), who wrote a long essay in 1967 (published by Parker) called "In Defense of Stirner," a response to some Italian academic dismissals. The Anglo-Americans tend to be more oriented toward unapologetically finding a place within a capitalist context, the better to pick at the inherent moralist hypocrisy of their fellow anarchists who try to fight against it (especially the leftists, but with a few choice jabs at the insurrectionary egoists as well).

Speaking of Martucci, the flavor of insurrectionary egoism is perhaps easily summed up this way:

But what is egoism? It is an uncoercible need that impels every living creature to provide for itself... When I deprive myself of my last piece of bread and give it to my neighbor who is hungry, I do so because the pain in my generous heart at his torment is less bearable than my hunger. If his agony did not pain me I would not give him my bread... In this absence of government and in the freedom that will come from it, those who feel love will love, and those who do not will not, and will maybe fight each other. We do not understand the motive that identifies freedom with universal harmony and would create

one idyllic type of life in place of innumerable different ones. Therefore not even anarchy will produce a general agreement based on an absolute conformism... we are not concerned with whether anarchy or archy can cement the best social relations, or bring about the most complete understanding and harmony between individuals. We try, instead, to discover which is the most useful for the realization and expression of the individual — who is the only existing reality. Is it anarchy, which offers me a free and perilous life, in which I might fall from one moment to another, but which allows me to affirm myself at least once? Is it archy, which guarantees me a controlled life in which I am confined and protected, but in which I can never live as I feel and will? Which is preferable — intensity or duration?... [Stirner] understood very well that in certain cases I cannot obtain the satisfaction of some of my needs without damaging the needs of others... Struggle is inevitable, and it is impossible to eliminate it from any kind of society or co-existence. But there will be other cases in which my interests will correspond with those of my neighbors. Then I agree with them and add my force to theirs in order to achieve a common end. In this way is formed a union of egoists. But this union is based on free agreement that can be cancelled at any time. (259–262)

In addition to many fine essays and reviews that make up the bulk of *EoS*, there is a fire-breathing introduction called “Preface: First Blood,” which establishes the aggressive tone, as befits a self-consciously insurrectionary anthology. There is also a very useful (and entertaining in its own right) glossary of terms partly written by the editor, partly taken from other contemporary egoists (*unattributed*, as befits a true egoist) called “Flaming Resurrections of a Charred Alphabet!” Together this makes for a welcome respite from the usual dreary surveys with their pretension to being all-inclusive, uplifting, and inspirational. *EoS* is agitation; most of the authors couldn’t care less if anyone else finds their writings inspirational or impor-

tant or even entertaining. They write for their own satisfaction. What else would we expect?

A frustration with the poor reception of the Idea breeds a certain amount of contempt toward what some individualists call “The Herd.” This attitude toward the benighted masses borders on condescension, a know-it-all sensibility they share with many anti-individualist social anarchists. My own annoyance at non-anarchists stems from what seems like a willful misunderstanding of anarchism coupled with their know-it-all attitude, perhaps best summed up in the typical response of those people who remain so (supposedly) objective about such things as Human Nature and History that they are able to proffer their (supposedly) expert conclusion that “it’s a nice idea, but it would never work.” Regardless, however much of a fan of Stirner I might be, however much I am irritated by the facile adherence of most people to the illusions of liberal democracy and an easy resignation (and therefore acceptance) in the face of virtually all of the foundations of industrial capitalism, I just cannot bring myself to abandon a basic empathy with normal people.

When the various authors in *EoS* express contempt at “the Herd” of normals, I am sometimes annoyed, other times saddened. It’s not that I am so desperate to make anarchist ideas palatable to people I meet or interact with regularly; rather it is perhaps that I remember when I lived with those same illusions, and remember how painful it was to peel my loyalty away from what had, until then, helped me adapt my more or less inherently rebellious nature to the oppressive nature of late-20th century American industrial capitalism. Each new layer exposed meant fewer allies, a pattern of increasing isolation and feelings of loneliness that at times became unbearable. Instead of blaming normals for remaining normal, I recognize that the choice to stand up against the status quo as a radical with any kind of integrity (anarchist or other) is more than a little difficult.