

In Which the Anarcho-Syndicalists Discover C4SS

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Most of the hatred directed at Center for a Stateless Society these days comes from the paleo-conservatives at Mises.org and LewRockwell.com, and their almost indistinguishable friends on the alt.right. So it's kind of refreshing to get some negative attention from the Old Left for a change — namely, the anarcho-syndicalists at Workers' Solidarity Alliance (Geoff R and Bryer Sousa, "A Free Market Fantasy," *Ideas and Action*, Nov. 7¹). Even so, it's a bit disappointing. I wouldn't expect them to match the paleocons in vituperation — nobody can beat constipated, elderly white men at that — but I would at least hope for something better in the way of intellectual quality.

It's no exaggeration to call the authors' analysis lazy and slipshod. The screed generalizes everyone at C4SS and Alliance of the Libertarian Left in the broadest possible terms, based on three — three! — footnotes. The sources on which all these generalizations are based? One article by Jason Lee Byas, one quote from an interview I did with Adam Kokesh several years ago... and a quote from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. What did they do, randomly select two C4SS pieces with the help of a dartboard?

The arguments are so self-contradictory as to border on incoherence. First they group together Benjamin Tucker and Henry George, along with Murray Rothbard and Ludwig von Mises, into a list of "thinkers' who generally argue for a synthesis of Austrian economics and 19th century American individualist anarchism." Wait — Benjamin Tucker argued for a synthesis of individualism with Austrian economics? Seriously? Then they turn around and quote — favorably — Tucker's socialistic prediction that with the abolition of capitalist monopolies, market competition would destroy rent, interest and profit. My guess is that the authors' intent was to accuse C4SS — rather than Tucker or George — of wanting to synthesize the individualists with the Austrians; but that's just a charitable guess in the face of their own sloppy editing.

Another gross error, which could have been avoided by even minimal due diligence, is treating C4SS as some kind of Austrian monolith. The two (apparently randomly-picked) quotes from me and Jason are treated as data points from which the authors extrapolate not just a line, but apparently the entire blueprint of coherent, internally consistent ideology. They first quote Jason

¹ <https://ideasandaction.info/2016/11/free-market-fantasy/>

on individualist anarchism as advocating “a ‘free market’ in the sense that it supports private property, money, commerce, contracts, entrepreneurship, and the profit motive.” In response, they quote Tucker — as mentioned above — to the effect that “Liberty will abolish interest; it will abolish profit; it will abolish monopolistic rent; it will abolish taxation; it will abolish the exploitation of labour; it will abolish all means whereby any laborer can be deprived of any of his product.” While as class struggle anarchists they don’t think all that highly of Tucker, “we’re not about to mischaracterize the strong anti-capitalist elements of it.”

With a little more reading at our website, it would have become obvious that C4SS is only defined as a “left market anarchist think tank,” with “left market anarchist” left largely undefined. Although a bare majority of us probably come from a left-Rothbardian background (i.e. from Rothbard’s period of collaboration with the New Left in the late ’60s, not his racist paleocon phase in the ’90s), by no means do we all. For example I am not an Austrian at all — the single biggest influence on me was Tucker’s anti-capitalist individualism, and I agree with every word of his prediction in the quote above.

Even so, I consider myself a “market anarchist” only in the sense that voluntary exchange will be part of the mix in a post-capitalist, post-state society. I prefer the label “anarchist without adjectives,” because I am skeptical of all ideological templates that attempt to impose any monolithic economic or organizational model on a future stateless society. Like David Graeber, Elinor Ostrom and similar thinkers, I place my trust entirely in the agency of free people dealing with each other face to face as equals. Whatever mixture of exchange, communism, gifting, natural resource commons, peer production, etc., that they decide on from one place to another is fine with me. The one assumption I make is that they will decide on such arrangements from a position of equal power, with nobody having an army at their back to enforce their absentee claim to large tracts of land or natural resources held out of use, or to enforce legal monopolies of any other kind and impose their will on others.

R and Sousa display still more incoherence in their interpretation of Adam Smith. Smith, they say, “suggested that that the crafters of legal statutes and political policy in his day” guaranteed that the state’s policy would promote primarily capitalist interests at the expense of everybody else. This, they go on to argue, demonstrates the sheer utopianism of believing “that markets could remedy the tendency of those in positions of power advance their interests through exploiting the laborers and working class.”

But if capitalists exploit the working class through statutes and policies enforced by the state, then “markets” as we understand them amount to the abolition of such statutes and policies. So “markets,” by definition, entail the abolition of capitalism in the sense of Tucker’s monopolies on land, credit and ideas. And the quote from Tucker, above — which the authors appear to cite favorably — is an explicit statement that “markets,” in the sense of abolishing monopolies in land and credit and opening them up to competition, would abolish all forms of rent extracted as surplus value from labor.

So these people really don’t seem to have any clear idea of whether they’re against an idea from one moment to the next.

They also treat C4SS — apparently based entirely on one quote — as “virtually pro-capitalist,” because of our support for “private property.”

First of all, fixating on the specific words “private property” without regard to what is meant by them is a notorious example of mistaking the map for the terrain. As I’ve argued before, virtually every society in history, going back to pre-state agrarian communism, has had “private

property” in the broad sense of a set of rules regulating priority of access to finite goods. If you don’t believe it, just imagine some random person in an anarcho-syndicalist society wandering into Machine Shop No. 17 and fiddling around with a lathe without permission.

On the other hand, most principled systems of property rules for land make a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate property rights. The rules for constructive abandonment or transfer may vary, but all of them treat the enclosure of unoccupied and undeveloped land as illegitimate. Thomas Hodgskin, a sort of English version of Benjamin Tucker, used the terms “natural” and “artificial” rights of property in a way that pretty much overlapped with Proudhon’s distinction between “possession” and “property.” Tucker himself sometimes used “property” as a pejorative, in Proudhon’s sense, and at other times spoke of an anarchist society in which legitimate “property” was based on occupancy and use. Franz Oppenheimer and Albert Nock made a similar distinction between (respectively), “natural appropriation” and “political appropriation” of land, and “labor-made” and “law-made” property.

My own preference is for the occupancy-and-use standard of Tucker and J.K. Ingalls. I have written extensively in defense of natural resource commons, and of the communal open-field model of land ownership that was almost universal from the Neolithic to early modern times. Other C4SS writers from a Rothbardian background take a more Lockean position, but even here most of them have moved considerably leftward from Rothbard’s own position and embraced much more liberal standards of constructive abandonment and adverse possession that, at the very least, considerably blur the boundary with occupancy-and-use. C4SS actually hosted a Mutual Exchange symposium on property rights that included advocacy for a wide variety of standards, with most of them falling closer to occupancy-and-use or Georgism than to the standard an-cap version of absentee ownership.

R and Sousa also take me to task for my own vision of a transition. As they describe it, I believe “that the end of capitalism is an approaching inevitability due to employers supposedly struggling to maintain hold over intellectual property claims as a result of increased file sharing over the internet and open source software.” That’s it – capitalism, according to their strawman version of Carson, is winding down for one reason, and one reason only.

In response, they note that “file sharing programs and websites are constantly being shut down, and more to-the-point, there’s no evidence of industries, like pharmaceuticals, being challenged in any serious way.”

Yeah, that was really amazing how the entertainment industry just shut down some websites and put an end to file-sharing, and their revenues went right back to ’90s levels, wasn’t it?

They also quote me from the Kokesh interview to the effect that states and corporations will be hollowed out, fiscally strapped states will be unable to provide subsidized infrastructures and cheap raw materials that big business depends on to be profitable, supply and distribution chains will shorten, and the economy will decentralize to neighborhood garage factories. This, they say, is unrealistic because an economy needs to be scalable and small-scale production for local markets would mean “severely limiting what people can produce.”

Where to start? First of all, the erosion of “intellectual property” enforcement is hardly the sole crisis tendency that I pin my hopes for an end to capitalism on. I agree with Michel Bauwens of the P2P Foundation that capitalism depends both on artificial scarcity of information enforced through patents and copyrights, but also on artificial abundance (i.e. artificially cheap material inputs).

Capitalism, historically, developed through the extensive addition of cheap inputs rather than intensively, through the more efficient use of existing inputs. Under both colonialism and post-colonialism, the state facilitated looting the global South of oil and mineral resources, which enabled a growth model based on wasteful use of energy and raw materials. Capitalist agriculture took place on enormous tracts of engrossed or enclosed land, with subsidized inputs like cheap irrigation water, and pursued mechanized farming models that were efficient in output per labor hour but grossly inefficient in terms of output per acre.

This artificial scarcity and artificial abundance are both becoming unsustainable. Scarcity of digital information is becoming increasingly unenforceable — including the threat to patented industrial designs coming from potentially piratable CAD/CAM files.

At the same time, artificial abundance is unsustainable because it's a basic economic law that corporations will pursue business models that economize on costly inputs and instead maximize reliance on extensive addition of inputs that are artificially cheap. Demand for subsidized inputs will outstrip the supply. So the economy is driven towards material input crises like Peak Oil, and crumbling infrastructure that can't keep up with the needs of corporations operating over larger and larger market areas. States must socialize larger and larger portions of the total operating costs of capital in order for business to be profitable until, as neo-Marxist James O'Connor pointed out, fiscally exhausted states can no longer keep up with the demand.

On top of all this there's the chronic tendency of corporate capitalism towards over-investment, underconsumption and excess capacity — a tendency that becomes worse over time and is exacerbated by technological advances in small-scale, cheap and ephemeral production machinery that requires less and less capital expenditure for a given level of output.

If they don't consider these terminal crisis tendencies, it's they who are unrealistic.

And the tendency towards small-scale production for local consumption is just that — a tendency. There will obviously be some forms of production — e.g. microchip foundries — that require larger-scale facilities than others. And there will be some need for transporting geographically limited raw materials from the areas where they're concentrated to the areas where goods are produced.

But I suspect there are some unspoken assumptions at work here about “economies of scale,” rooted in the ideology of the Old Left, by which large scale and capital-intensiveness are inherently more efficient and progressive. And that's nonsense, for reasons that are too long to go into here (but are discussed at length in my book *The Homebrew Industrial Revolution*).

It's ironic that they describe my practical vision as “far removed from reality” — and use the term “fantasy” in their title — because those are exactly the terms I'd use for the anarcho-syndicalist model they advocate.

liberty for the working class means can only come about via the triumphal conquest of the class war and therefore taking direct control of the existing economy as a means of placing it in the hands of the working class while moving towards stateless socialism.

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As class struggle libertarians we know that the only positive alternative to capitalism, that we can currently conceive of, must center upon the working class taking

direct control of existing factories and workplaces such that they are able to then re-arrange the economy to make it directly accountable to the workers and therefore community members needs through worker self-management.

This is a heroic Old Left fantasy based on an obsolete mass-production technological model that resembles the real world less and less every day. And the authors ignore left-wing currents around the world that have developed specifically in response to the obsolescence of their model.

It's highly disingenuous to contrast my (and other C4SS writers') gradualist, decentralized transition model with some sort of global Leftist consensus based on organizational mass and insurrection. The central theme of contemporary autonomist Marxism is a shift from giant organizations and insurrectional seizure to gradualism and Exodus. The rapid transformation of the working class, the blurring of the lines between work and the rest of life, and the shift in meeting a growing share of our needs into the informal and social economy, mean that the Old Left's workerism (and like Harry Cleaver, I include syndicalism and council communism in the Old Left), its focus on the production process as the center of society, and its treatment of the industrial proletariat as the subject of history, have become obsolete. In this regard, read Toni Negri's contrast of the Multitude to previous Old Left ideas of the proletariat.

Mostly, I call it a heroic fantasy because any model that envisions a post-capitalist transition based on the universal adoption of any monolithic, schematized social model is as ridiculous as Socrates and Glaucon discussing what musical instruments and poetic metres will be permitted in the perfect state. The real world version of the post-capitalist transition — just as with the transition to capitalism five centuries earlier — isn't a matter of any single cohesive social class, as the subject of history, systematically remaking the world guided by some single, comprehensive ideology, and organized around a uniform institutional model. It's a matter of a wide variety of prefigurative institutions and technological building blocks that already exist in the present society, continuing to grow and coalesce together until they reach sufficient critical mass for a phase transition — a phase transition whose outlines can only be guessed at in the most general terms. This is the model advocated by Michel Bauwens, by Paul Mason, by John Holloway, by Peter Frase, and by a lot of other people who can hardly be fitted into any American individualist ghetto.

The German council communist revolution, the Kronstadt mutiny and the CNT uprising of 1936 were all heroic efforts that illustrated possible ways, under the conditions of that day and age, that people could fight to build a better world. But as concrete organizational models, that kind of workerism and emphasis on organizational coordination and mass reflects an obsolete mass-production era social model that is as dead and gone as the T. Rex.

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