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Individualist Anarchists in the First International, Etc.

Kevin Carson

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Well, Shawn Wilbur's blog is living up to his reputation. In his second post, he's already got an excellent piece of historical analysis on the confusion of tongues within the International Workingmen's Association:

...the more individualistic and market-friendly early forms of anarchism pose all sorts of problems for contemporary anarchist ideologies — both right and left. Engaging with them takes us back to a time before the marxian coup in the First International remapped the political terrain, when *socialism* still meant little more than simultaneous concerns with social science and social justice. It's hard to grasp the diversity of that International. Beyond the familiar assortment of folks from the labor movement, the cooperatives, Proudhonists, Marxists, Bakuninists and such, Stephen Pearl Andrews and the Woodhull sisters were part of an American section grounded

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in part in Andrews' pantarchy and universology. William Batchelder Greene, the "American Proudhon," was a member of a French-speaking Boston chapter which understood the work of the International as a continuation of that of the Knights Templar. Cabet's Icarians were represented as well. You can imagine Marx tearing out his hair, wondering how he could get rid of half this crew. He worked it out eventually, of course, expelling the American English-speaking sections before he and Bakunin had a chance to duke it out. And while he was at it, Andrews and Greene continued to translate and disseminate Marx and Engels' *Manifesto*.

I'll be honest. The strange, promiscuous character of that First International fascinates me. All of the work that I've been doing on the history of anarchism and mutualism is aimed at getting a glimpse of some of the *roads not travelled* from that point to the present. It's tempting to say that the breakup of the International was a sort of Tower of Babel incident for the broad socialist movement. Certainly, some form of *common language* was lost, as it rapidly became almost impossible to speak of a broad socialist movement — and largely remains so today. But the incident is also, and perhaps more compellingly, a sort of Babel-*in-reverse*. First, there was a clamor of voices, but there was also this fragile joint project, the International. And then there was a different sort of clamor, but not within the joint project, which had become rather narrow and German... There's still a lot of historical spadework to be done to flesh out the genealogies of the various current anarchistic and socialistic currents, but there's

also the very difficult job of trying to grasp the character of the International in that earlier moment.

I guess i'm happy to call myself a mutualist because it positions me within a story that *must* reach back before marxian takeover — to the extent that it's possible to do so. Mutualism, for me, is necessarily identified with the sort of chaos-in-concert that seems to have characterized that early, broad socialism.

The contrast to that “early, broad socialism” is especially jarring, to someone living in the aftermath of the state socialist ascendancy. Engels had reached the point in *Anti-Duhring* of envisioning a transition to “socialism” consisting of the workers’ state expropriating the One Big Trust, with the state replacing the board of directors as the final authority from which the professional managers took orders (with production being run on the basis of strict one-man management, of course—no room for any of that left-wing infantalist nonsense). It’s no wonder that Mises, by the time he got around to writing on the calculation problem, could matter-of-factly define “socialism” as state ownership and planning of the economy. It’s hard to believe that the very term was coined by an Owenite cooperative magazine; or that there was a time when Proudhon identified it with free exchange between producers’ associations, and Tucker with “consistent Manchesterism”; and even Marx could write of a society run by the “associated producers.”

In the process of his post, Shawn includes this statement of mutualist angst, which resonates powerfully with me.

There was a time, not all that long ago when *mutualist* was a term used very little among the generally left-anarchist company i was keeping. It struck me as a term used to keep folks like Proudhon carefully suspended about half in and half out of “proper anarchism.” It was also a *nice* way to say “individualist an-

archism” without starting quite as many fights. There still aren’t very many of us who call ourselves *mutualists*, but at least now when we do so we only have to explain why we’re not automatically enemies of anarchism *about half the time*. Let’s hear it for progress.

Testify! Mutualism/individualism being such a neither-fish-nor-fowl kind of thing, I find myself often reminded of its fringe status in both the free market and libertarian socialist movements. In the mainstream of both movements, the majority response I encounter ranges from

1. grudging tolerance toward a wayward comrade (one of me is OK, provided I’m willing to write off those other commies/capitalists as beyond the pale); to
2. shrieking and finger-pointing, like a pod person in *Body Snatchers* (He’s not really one of us! He’s a commie/capitalist cuckoo in the libertarian/anarchist nest!). I kid you not—I’ve been called an “Ayn Rand-worshipping Nazi” in social anarchist venues for advocating *laissez-faire*, and a “commie” in right-wing libertarian ones for saying nasty things about landlords.