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On the Shoulders of Giants

Kevin Carson

15 November 2012

I was pleased — not to mention honored — to see my work included in Vol. 3 (*The New Anarchism: 1974-2008*) of Robert Graham's anthology "Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas." It's grouped together, in a section entitled "Libertarian Alternatives," with Murray Bookchin, Graham Purchase and Adam Buick, among others.

But I'd hate for anyone to get the impression that my "free market anti-capitalism" is sui generis. In fact for well over a decade it's been "steam engine time" for left-wing free market analysis. And the intellectual foundations of our thought go back very far indeed.

First, the classical liberalism of two centuries ago was in many ways a left-wing critique of the large landed and mercantile interests. Classical liberalism and classical socialism were very closely related in their origins, and the two currents often overlapped considerably. Although the "Ricardian socialist" label conventionally ascribed to him is somewhat misleading, Thomas Hodgskin — one of the major influences on my own thought — was in fact both a classical liberal in the tradition of Adam Smith and an anti-capitalist who gave lectures in radical political economy to the London Mechanics Institution.

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Since then there has been a broad current of thought that is both socialistic in its objectives and free market libertarian in its praxis; it has included the individualist anarchists of Benjamin Tucker's "Liberty" group, figures like Dyer Lum and Voltairine de Cleyre on the border between individualist anarchism and labor radicalism, and Georgists and quasi-Georgists ranging from Henry George himself to Franz Oppenheimer, Albert Jay Nock and Ralph Borsodi.

Second, the modern libertarian movement has had left-leaning strands. As far back as the late '60s, in the mainstream American libertarian movement, Murray Rothbard and Karl Hess were seeking areas of commonality with the libertarian wing of SDS, and with revisionist scholars like William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko and David Horowitz (long story), in critiquing the fundamentally statist character of American corporate capitalism. Or as Rothbard put it, in "The Student Revolution": "... our corporate state uses the coercive taxing power either to accumulate corporate capital or to lower corporate costs."

And third, even as I was groping toward what I eventually labeled "free market anti-capitalism," I found many others on the same path. My first close affiliation in the anarchist milieu was with Ed Stamm's affinity group, the *Voluntary Cooperation Movement* — a major component of which was the revived Proudhonian mutualism promoted by Larry Gambone at *Red Lion Press*. Jonathan Simcock, editor of *Total Liberty* in the UK — while not an avowed individualist anarchist — provided a clearinghouse for surviving members in the individualist anarchist community. In the U.S., Joe Peacott of the Boston Anarchist Drinking (B.A.D.) Brigade adhered to the original, anti-capitalist version of individualist anarchism. To the extent that you could squeeze the rather prickly and irascible Fred Woodworth of Tucson's *The Match!* into any particular category, individualist anarchism is probably it.

Meanwhile Auburn University philosophy professor Roderick T. Long had already been evolving from a fairly orthodox Rothbardianism toward a left-wing free market critique of capitalism. His former grad assistant Charles Johnson, a left-wing social anarchist in his origins, was — although never embracing Rothbardianism as such — influenced by Long in adopting a free market critique of capitalism.

Long, Johnson, and other leftward-evolving Rothbardians like Brad Spangler (founder of Center for a Stateless Society) have since coalesced — along with assorted individualist anarchists (like yours truly), Georgists and others disgruntled with the conventional libertarian right (like C4SS Media Director Thomas Knapp) into a large and loosely organized movement that includes the Alliance of the Libertarian Left and C4SS. We include Sheldon Richman (who published or wrote a great deal of left-libertarian commentary at *The Freeman*, and now edits *Freedom Monthly*), Gary Chartier of La Sierra University who has written a considerable body of left-libertarian books and articles, and a whole community of excellent writers who engage in free market critiques of capitalism and anarchist critiques of state and cultural authoritarianism: David D'Amato, Ross Kenyon, Anna Morgenstern, Keith Taylor, James Tuttle and Darian Worden, among many others (to whom I apologize for leaving out).

During the same period Shawn Wilbur has amassed an impressive body of scholarly analysis and recovered an enormous collection of mutualist and individual anarchist literature from the early and mid-19th century.

In the UK, Sean Gabb has created a welcoming space for left-libertarian commentary at the *Libertarian Alliance*. From the Randian community, Objectivist Chris Sciabarra and post-Objectivist Arthur Silber have developed the neglected anti-corporatist and culturally libertarian aspects of Ayn Rand's thought.

And it's hardly as if this mushrooming tendency is limited to the ALL/C4SS community or even to the legacy libertarian movement. As I said earlier, it's steam engine time for critiques of the corporate welfare state, corporatism and crony capitalism. They can be found in Dean Baker's *The Conservative Nanny State* and Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*, among other places. Even the Koch Brothers, of all people, pay lip-service to them.

What all this amounts to, I think, is that the raw materials for a free market critique of capitalism from the Left have been lying to hand for a long time. The problem was that the old broadcast/gatekeeper media culture erected enormous transaction cost barriers against aggregating these raw materials into a coherent school of thought. Bits and pieces of this free market anti-capitalist analysis were picked up and developed by larger pre-existing schools of thought, but for the most part they groped their way around separate parts of the elephant. The people who were most likely to develop all these bits and pieces into a coherent whole were largely limited to angry letters to the editor and photocopied 'zines.

The rise of the Worldwide Web, and the near-zero transaction costs of aggregating ideas, changed all this. Throughout history, there have always been those who (pick your cliché) saw the fnoords or glitches in the Matrix — who saw the internal contradictions in the ruling class ideology, and attempted to recuperate its concepts as a weapon against the system of power. From the mid-90s on, everyone capable of putting two and two together has been doing so — and rapidly making the acquaintance of all the others who've been drawing the same conclusions. Since then, we've been coalescing like a liquid metal Terminator into a self-conscious movement, dedicated to using the master's tools to tear down the master's house.