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Economic Philosophy for the Self-Interested Worker

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I've been re-reading Avrahm Yarmolinski's *Road to Revolution*. It's one of my favorite books on radical history. I happened to stumble upon it by chance sometime in twenty seventeen, a mere year after first self identifying with anarchism. Back then, while I never totally identified with anarcho-communism, I was adjacent to that as I primarily identified with Rudolph Rocker's conception of Anarcho-syndicalism. And while I have not necessarily abandoned my affinity for syndicalism, I'm somewhat of an oddball syndicalist in that I wish for a syndicalism based not on libertarian communism, but instead on continental mutualism. From that early libertarian communist adjacent perspective, I was like most American progressives in that I accepted the popular dichotomy which casts socialism as being a quasi-religion based totally on self sacrifice and altruism, while holding capitalism to be the ideology of egoism and self interest. And thus I scoffed at any suggestion that humans were on average, somewhat selfish. Upon reading Yarmolinski's *Road to Revolution: A Century of Russian Radicalism* I was shocked to find

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that the commonly accepted aforementioned dichotomy is a modern invention.

In the book Yarmolinski describes the different moral attitudes of the populist movement. They range from amoral nihilism, perhaps adjacent to Max Stirner, to dogmatic moral absolutism. I'm not a moral nihilist. I do see the value in morality and ethics as concepts. I think they can be beneficial to the individual and society when applied delicately and with a heavy dose of relativity, and thus I tend to be very wary of moral absolutism or anything that smacks of the sacred. And I can sympathize with the nihilistic criticism of morality on that level, while not necessarily endorsing nihilism in its entirety. Let's consider two moral attitudes in the populist movement- the quasi religious and the enlightened egoist.

The quasi religious:

There were those who felt that they were missionaries of a new gospel and, in fact, not without satisfaction they anticipated martyrdom. One young woman had a fixed idea that a revolutionary was most effective when he suffered for the cause. A participant in the movement reports that he saw some propagandists pore over the pages of the New Testament. A wooden cross stood on a shelf in the headquarters of a tiny circle the members of which were the first to 'go to the people.' They dreamed of a new faith that would at once steel the intellectuals with fresh courage and enlist the religious sentiment of the masses on the side of revolution. Lavrov has it that the intention of the agitators was not to accomplish something of practical value, but to perform a podvig, a deed of self-abnegation and spiritual merit. At the time, he wrote, Populism resembled a religious sect rather than a political party.

do with it. All we have to do is recognize that every worker is a self interested individual, and that our mutual freedom and material well being can be achieved through the democratic worker cooperative, free association, and the abolition of the state.

I've met many socialists that fall into this kind of thinking, and personally I find them to be insufferable. The most ironic thing about them is that they alienate themselves from the very workers that they fetishize by preaching to them about morality instead of trying to spark their interest via the promise of a bigger paycheck and more personal freedom. They don't see people as individuals with real interests, they see them as potential converts to the new faith. Ironically, the whole thing becomes about self gratifying martyrdom, as Lavrov points out. From that perspective they assume the paternal attitude of an enlightened despot, not an enlightened egoist. They view themselves as the arbiters of morality and goodness and instead become the harbingers of amorality and despair. What I mean is that this typically ends in one adopting a black and white world view, which unsurprisingly leads to a far worse strain of nihilism than any self interested egoist "libertine" could arrive at. This is the nihilism of Nechayev or Machiavelli, where means justify the ends, and people are not people, they are meager appendages of the "mass" that can be shorn off and discarded so they do not corrupt the social organism as a whole. If you find yourself in a place where you're willing to throw your own life away for the glory of "the revolution" (an abstract idea), what might you be willing to do to others who stand in the way of that?

Contrast that mentality with Yarmolinski's description of Chernyshevsky's enlightened egoism:

to pursue one's self-interest one must be free to do so and one must know wherein it lies. Chernyshevsky attributed the greatest importance to knowledge as a power for good. People were wicked, he believed, because they did not know that it was to their advantage to eschew evil. His shibboleth was enlightened egoism. This, he held, precluded narrowly selfish, anti-social acts. It

led the individual, naturally and effortlessly, to identify his own happiness with the happiness of all, his private advantage with the public weal. Furthermore, he argued that since man belongs in the order of nature, he is a creature of circumstance, shaped as an ethical being by society. Consequently, in the last account, moral responsibility lies there.

Now Chernyshevsky has his own issues, chief among them being his opposition to any kind of market transaction. In addition Chernyshevsky did not always take his own ideas to their rational ends, he could on occasion be as blood thirsty and zealous as his religiously minded counterparts. I do not wish to place him on a pedestal anymore than I do Karl Marx, Proudhon, or Bakunin. As with all great thinkers he inspired a wide range of people; everyone from Vladimir Lenin, to Emma Goldman and some say even Ayn Rand. I count myself among those who believe that he was an inspiration to Rand, being a native Russian, it was likely that she was familiar with his work.

Typically political pundits in the west frame socialism as the economy of altruism, and capitalism as the economy of self interest. It's also a common assumption in our age that humans are self interested creatures, its practically taken for granted. The logic then follows that "humans are selfish, and thus we need an economy based on self interest." Well, I disagree with the idea that capitalism is the only economic form that is compatible with self interest, I believe that socialism is also compatible with human self interest, it merely expresses the self interest of the working class instead of the employing class. When you take into account the fact that most of humanity is made up of the working class, some kind of socialism would then express the self interest of a far greater chunk of the human race than would capitalism. That makes socialism far more compatible with human self interest than capitalism, in my book. It

is that kernel of truth I wish to extract from Chernyshevsky's ideology. I believe the basic concept of rooting socialism in the mutual self interest of workers is much more convincing than some highfalutin pseudo-religious moral ideal.

The fact is workers come in all colors. Literally and metaphorically. We come from all over the world and we all have different moral and cultural ideas. What unites us is our economic interests, not necessarily what we believe as individuals, that in my opinion is the most solid foundation of socialism. If we can get people to recognize that simple fact they might begin to see the individual where they previously saw the "other". They might be able to look beyond their own moral dogmas and personal prejudices that they've inherited from the society in which they were born. However, if instead we come at people with condescending moral attitudes we risk alienating them before we even start. This is not to say we can win everyone over with the promise of material well being and freedom, a true believer in reactionary dogma is just as hell bent on martyrdom as the religious revolutionary. Both are willing to throw themselves and others on the pyre for their faith. But this attitude is what we should seek to avoid, so we might not want the true believers anyway, as they will likely just replace one violent faith with another.

The other advantage of a socialism based on enlightened egoism is that we don't have to place anyone on a pedestal. We don't have to "go to the people" and preach down at them from the pulpit. We can meet them where they are at, on their own terms as individuals. We don't have to seize power to create some magical utopia at their expense either, because from this perspective socialism is not the end in itself, it's the means to an end; material well being for yourself and others. If taken to its logical conclusion, this kind of socialism would exclude any roads that entail mass suffering for the red gospel. After all, if a form of socialism leads to the enslavement and misery of the individual, then it is self-defeating and we want nothing to