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Calling All Haters Of Anarcho-Capitalism

William Gillis

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Roderick T. Long has a wonderful article on Market Anarchism and Anarcho-Capitalism that you absolutely need to read.¹ But if I just put it in a link, chances are you won't follow it. So I'm going to make things even easier for you and quote the whole friggin article here so you won't even have to go anywhere.

It's fun, interesting and short, I promise. And afterward I'll savage it so you won't have to.

Okay? Here goes [emphasis mine]:

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Consider the following two lists of names:

¹“Against Anarchist Apartheid”: <https://aeblog.com/2007/04/against-anarch>

Group 1	Group 2
Pierre-Joseph Proudhon	Gustave de Molinari
Josiah Warren	Herbert Spencer (early)
Stephen Pearl Andrews	Auberon Herbert
Ezra Heywood	Wordsworth Donisthorpe
Anselme Bellegarrigue	Rose Wilder Lane
Lysander Spooner	Robert LeFevre
Benjamin Tucker	Murray Rothbard
Francis D. Tandy	David Friedman
John Henry Mackay	Randy Barnett
Voltairine de Cleyre (early)	Samuel E. Konkin 3.0
Franz Oppenheimer	Hans-Hermann Hoppe

It's obvious what the two lists have in common: all the names on both lists belong to thinkers who have favoured radically free markets and the abolition of the state – hence, one might infer, market anarchists.

But it's quite common in left-anarchist circles to insist that while the Group 1 thinkers are genuine anarchists, those in Group 2 are not true anarchists at all – on the grounds that true anarchists must oppose not only the state but also capitalism. Group 1, we're told, is commendably anti-capitalist and so authentically anarchist; but the members of Group 2 exclude themselves from the anarchist ranks by their advocacy of capitalism. (I'm not sure into which group geolibbers like Albert J. Nock and Frank Chodorov, or migrating thinkers like Karl Hess, are supposed to fall, so I left their names off.)

I am not a fan, needless to say, of this putative distinction between "true" and "false" market anarchists. I plan to criticise the case for the distinction in fuller detail on a future occasion; for now I'll limit myself to two major points.

First: **those who draw this distinction are hardly ever market anarchists themselves.** They are more often anarcho-communists or anarcho-collectivists who regard both Group 1 and Group 2 as making unacceptable concessions

a computer screen, act like assholes and maliciously dilute the definition of anarchism to meaninglessness. When they organize a single factory with an individualistic alternative to union collectivism. When they start a project to feed the homeless. When they take up arms in a campaign against a fascist government. When they do more than talk. Or even just address the racism, sexism and assorted bullshit rife in their movement and start seriously working to self-improve. ...Then maybe I'll consider your points. But until then. Dude. CAPITALISM.

And then we drop the issue and walk on. Talking about how beauty is hierarchy. How patriarchy may in fact make it impossible for males to indicate interest without breaking some measure of consent. How the singularity might impose new hierarchies through energy-matter concentration. How relativity will make post-earth societies equalize towards anarchism. How Stirner's authoritarianism came from his unwillingness to fully explore individualism. How symbolic logic is the root of all alienation. How anarchist parenting circles have begun to incubate justifications for ever-so-slight forms of authoritarianism. Who's becoming a rockstar personality within the scene. Where the best Hummus can be dumpstered. And what's the latest from the comrades we know in Greece/Argentina/Mexico/Ireland/Palestine/Turkey/Denmark/Korea...

And we don't talk about market economics. We don't exchange examples and models of Rothbardian solutions to organizing problems. We don't apply the subjective theory of value to more fluidly and organically back up our criticisms of economic authoritarianism. And at the end of the day they don't move beyond the same old creaking Marxist bullshit.

The end.

Because interpersonal forms of power, of coercion, of violence... of rulership are not acceptable. And yes, that damn well means the subtle stuff. You can't extract the cruel words spoken from husband to wife from the whole fucking system of inequalities (in opportunity) and domineering psychological coercion backed up with centralized, structured physical force. You want to tell me that psychological forms of control are less important than some direct and showy physical instrumentation? It's all psychological! The gun or the schoolteacher's blackboard, the BET music video, that's a bullshit distinction. And every time an ancap makes it –spewing their aloof privilege all over the place– their economic ideas are taken a lot less seriously.

Let me tell you, every time I get social anarchists to put aside their immature hate-mongering of anarcho-capitalism and have a serious discussion it's not the historically fluid definition of capitalism that concerns them, it's the nature of the anarcho-capitalist movement. *Okay, fine*, they eventually smilingly cede, *they may have some interesting or semi-valid anti-authoritarian economics, blah, blah blah. But come on Will, do you seriously think they've got the interpersonal down? Have you ever been to their websites?! Sure, they may be anti-state but even if I grant that they're effectively anti-kapitalism, does that really add up to a hill of beans? Come on.*

And every time I'm forced to cede that yeah, okay, so they're not really anarchists by and large. Anymore than we'd consider those old dead white male proto-anarchists were they to suddenly be resurrected. But, hey, let's stop being dicks to them.

Why?

Well... because there *are* some good ones. Some. Okay, they may not have been part of the dozens you've interacted with. But I swear to you they *do* exist. No it's not like some rare bird.

And if I really persist they'll end the conversation like so: *When they do something anything, anything. Besides sit behind*

to economic individualism. (Indeed they often dismiss even their favoured Group 1 – apart from Proudhon, anyway – as “Stirnerites,” even though most of the Group 1 thinkers developed their views independently of Max Stirner; in fact even Tucker, the clearest “Stirnerite” of the lot, was already a committed market anarchist before he'd ever encountered Stirner's ideas.) **When anti-market anarchists propose to decide who is and who isn't a genuine market anarchist, it's a bit like Christians demanding the right to adjudicate the dispute between Shi'ites and Sunnis.** (One suspects that some of the anti-market folks would really like to purge both groups of market anarchists, but the anarchist credentials of Group 1 are too well-established for that to be a practical solution.)

Rather than inquiring as to the opinions of anti-market anarchists, then, it would seem more relevant to know whether the Group 1 thinkers regarded Group 2 as fellow-anarchists or not. **And in fact such Group 2 luminaries as Molinari, Donisthorpe, and the early Spencer were indeed all hailed in the pages of Tucker's Liberty (the chief American organ of individualist anarchism, which published most of the Group 1 writers) as anarchists – and Herbert as a near-anarchist.** (Donisthorpe even wrote both for Liberty and for the journal of the Liberty and Property Defence League – thus bridging a supposedly unbridgeable ideological gulf.) **Thus America's leading Group 1 spokesman, while certainly critical of Group 2 thinkers on various points, apparently had no problem recognising them as fellow-anarchists.** (Compare also the largely favourable attitude today of Tuckerite Kevin Carson toward Rothbardians and Konkinites.)

Nor was this because Tucker was especially generous with the term “anarchist.” On the contrary, Tucker withheld the term from anarcho-communists like Johann Most, Pëtr Kropotkin, and the Haymarket martyrs; from Tucker's point

of view, it was they, not the Spencerians, who were “false” anarchists. Needless to say, I don’t advocate following Tucker’s example on this point; one parochialism is no improvement over the other. But the fact that the editor of Liberty – who always called his position “consistent Manchesterism” – felt less close to contemporary anarcho-communists than to the forerunners of “anarcho-capitalism” (for surely Tucker’s views on Molinari and the radical Spencerians seem like the best guide we could have to what his views would most likely have been on Rothbard, Friedman, etc.) tells against the simplistic division of market anarchists into socialistic sheep and capitalistic goats. (Indeed the contributors to Liberty cited Spencer as often as they did Proudhon; while, for that matter, Karl Marx complained that Proudhon himself was more respectful toward quasi-anarchic classical liberals like Charles Dunoyer than toward revolutionary communists like Étienne Cabet.)

Second: it’s thoroughly unclear by what criteria Group 1 and Group 2 are supposed to be distinguished. Defenders of the dichotomy insist that Group 1 is “anti-capitalist” while Group 2 is “pro-capitalist”; but in order for this to be a useful marker it needs to be substantive, not merely terminological. **The fact that Group 1 thinkers tend to use “socialism” as a virtue-word and “capitalism” as a vice-word, while Group 2 thinkers tend to do the reverse, by itself means little; because the two groups clearly do not mean the same things by these terms.** Most Group 2 thinkers use the term “capitalism” to mean an unregulated free market, and use the term “socialism” to mean government control; most Group 1 thinkers use those terms differently, but agree with their Group 2 counterparts in favouring free markets and opposing government control, by whatever names they may call them. In Thomas Hobbes’s words: “Words are wise men’s counters, they do but reckon by them; but they are the money of fools.”

Given the enormous variability in the use of the term “capitalism,” then, it will hardly do to base a crucial dis-

of-empathy-free card, a quiet euthanasia for their pesky conscience. With socialism as the all-purpose big baddie, they can divorce themselves from all connection to their humanity... all under the rubric of resisting Soviet Death Camp Evil.

But here’s news for yah: **Anarchism has as little to do with anti-statism as it does with anti-capitalism.**

That’s not the point.

Such minor details are *byproducts* of our underlying morality. ...*And almost inconsequential in our day-to-day lives.*

As an Anarchist my first and foremost priority is the abolition of power structures and blind faiths. And the most powerful, most pressing, of these are in the daily interpersonal relations and frameworks we all associate within. Racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, these are no more abstract platonic forces than the battered-child psychosis that moves a cop to raise his truncheon. They are products of *our minds*.

Acquiescence to authority, to the ‘state’ of social power structures in our world. To domination, subjugation and victimization. To the irrational calculus of hatred and greed. These are the viral roots –the radis– of rulership. Of what is known alternatively as authority, hierarchy and sociological power. And our unflinching pursuit of these roots, our inability to accept blithe abstractions or simplifications is what makes Anarchism the most *radical* realization of political philosophy.

I harp on a lot about anarcho-capitalism and market anarchism to my friends within the social movement. But what drives my distaste with the scene’s inquisition against ancaps is not the equal or acceptable nature of the anarcho-capitalist movement compared to our own, but horrified outrage at the manner, the behavior and conduct of those I expect better from. I could give a shit if David Friedman’s a homophobe. I’ve never been given any reason to consider him an anarchist and I don’t. But when social anarchists start behaving like stalinist goons I get seriously upset.

able in political ideology/idealism– *is defined by its opposition to rulership. All forms of rulership.*

Insofar as you begin to oppose all forms of rulership you move towards anarchism.

One can whine and wheedle all one likes about Spooner’s support for intellectual property or Bakunin’s anti-semitism – and let’s not even begin on Proudhon!– but you can’t compare today’s vulgar-libertarian excusists for privilege and corporate power with our fledgling predecessors. Even if there ever was an excuse for the failings of such proto-anarchists, there certainly exists no such excuse today.

We have moved on.

Moved closer to anarchism. Adopted a stronger rejection of rulership. And that progress –that fervent and passionate pursuit– is clearly not mirrored within the libertarian tradition.

“Race-realists,” social-Darwinians, corporatists, classists, misogynists, homophobes and plain authoritarian bastards abound in the “anarcho”-capitalist movement.

And certainly we too have our share of assholes and stalinists –as our abhorrent handling of anarcho-capitalism so clearly demonstrates. *But we’re working on it.*

We don’t and haven’t ever seen our present condition to be adequate or acceptable. We’re perpetually self-critiquing, always looking for ways to grow. To be better anarchists. To be *more* anarchist.

And that’s something that’s plainly not apparent or important in anarcho-capitalist circles. The buzzword is stagnation. Anarcho-capitalism as a political philosophy and as a social movement has grown around the self-justification of power and identity. Of privilege and psychosis. They already have all the answers –abolish the US government– in a neat, clean packaging that comfortably strokes the rest of their identity.

Because the abolition of the Westphalian nationstate system magically frees them from all moral quandaries. Don’t like something, well then that’s *your* fault. It’s an instant get-out-

unction among antistate thinkers on their attitudes to some undefined abstraction called “capitalism.” We need to know what specific positions are supposed to divide Group 1 and Group 2. But it’s awfully hard to find positions that divide the two groups in the desired way.

Is it their stand on the labour theory of value? Except insofar as that translates into policy differences, what difference does that make?

Is it their stand on the wages system and the exploitation of labour by capital? By that standard, Group 2 thinkers Spencer, Konkin, and Friedman, who favoured abolition of wage labour, all belong in Group 1, while Molinari and Donisthorpe, who favoured reforming the wages system to shift the power balance in workers’ favour, fall somewhere between the two groups.

Is it their stand on land ownership and rent? By that standard Spencer, in rejecting land ownership entirely, is more “socialistic” than Tucker and so belongs in Group 1, while Spooner, in endorsing absentee landlordism, is more “capitalistic” than Tucker and so belongs in Group 2.

Is it their stand on protection agencies and private police as quasi-governmental? By that standard Tucker, Tandy, and Proudhon, who all favoured private police, belong in “pseudo-anarchistic” Group 2, while LeFevre, who rejected all violence even for defensive purposes, would have to be moved to Group 1.

Is it their stand on intellectual property? By that standard, IP fan Spooner would have to be assigned to the “pro-property” Group 2, while most present-day Rothbardians, as IP foes, would need to be shifted to the “anti-property” Group 1.

Is it their stand on the legitimacy of interest? Well, perhaps in the abstract; but both sides tend to predict a drastic fall in the price of loans as the result of free competition in the credit industry; and both deny that it will fall to zero. Group 1 thinkers tend to call this nonzero residuum “cost” while Group

2 thinkers tend to call it “interest”; ho-hum. This seems a weak reed to burden with so weighty a dichotomy.

None of the criteria I’ve most often seen appealed to, then, seem to divide the two groups in the desired manner based on concrete positions. I suspect what actually drives proponents of the purported dichotomy is no specific policy dispute but rather a general feeling that Group 2’s pro-market rhetoric is a cover for a rationalisation of the power relations that prevail in existing corporate capitalism, while Group 1’s likewise pro-market rhetoric – however misguided it may appear in the eyes of the dichotomists – is not. And that perception in turn is based, I suspect, on the fact that Group 2 thinkers are more likely than Group 1 thinkers to fall into what Kevin Carson has labeled “vulgar libertarianism,” that is, the error of treating defenses of the free market as though they served to justify various features of the prevailing not-so-free order.

Now it’s true enough that Group 2 is more liable to this unfortunate tendency than is Group 1. But:

- a) few Group 2 thinkers commit the error consistently;
- b) some Group 2 thinkers (e.g. Konkin, or 1960s Rothbard – or Hess, if he counts as Group 2) don’t seem to commit it much at all;
- c) vulgar-libbin’ seems no worse an error, no stronger a reason to kick somebody out of the anarchist club, than, say, Proudhon’s egregious misogyny and anti-Semitism; and
- d) if confusing free markets with corporate capitalism isn’t grounds to disqualify anti-market anarchists (who often seem to commit the same error in the opposite direction), why should it be grounds to disqualify vulgar-libbers?

Hence I see no defensible grounds for accepting any dichotomy between Groups 1 and 2. They are all market anarchists – with various virtues and various flaws, but comrades all.

Okay. Still with me? Cool. Now I said I would savage Professor Long’s underlying point –that is to say the inclusion of group 2 as valid anarchists– and I will, but first let’s stop and have a look at what he’s saying because he makes some very valid points along the way.

1.) The sacred, blessed division between individualist anarchists and the dread anarcho-capitalists is a distinction largely invented and arrogantly imposed by Kropotkin followers who have absolutely no understanding, experience with or connection to market anarchism.

2.) Using opposition to the term “capitalism” as a litmus test for inclusion in “anarchism” is a slimy, underhanded decades-old tactic on the part of the reds to ideologically center the movement on their own tradition and purge divergent perspectives. And furthermore it bears little or no reality given the obvious fluidity of the term and the deep intermingling of both groups. (Voltaire herself wasn’t afraid to associate with the label of capitalist.)

Both of these points are absolutely right on the money. And they lay out how and why Social Anarchists crusading against Anarcho-Capitalism often come off as such assholes. (If not immature stalinists.)

But.

Plain fact of the matter is *a good number of the people in Group 2 –that is to say “anarcho”-capitalists– are obviously, plainly and resoundingly **not anarchists.***

That’s non-negotiable. We may be pretty loose and encompassing on some things... But we’re not an open tent for every wayward anti-state fascist to come in and shit all over the floor just because they feel like it. (I would direct you towards post-modernism.)

Professor Long addresses a whole bunch of academic criteria, but they’re all beside the fucking point. “Anarchy” –in one of the most brilliant, clear and crystalline etymologies avail-