

Objectivity and Right-Libertarian Scholarship

**A Reply to Bryan Caplan's Essay "The Anarcho-Statists of Spain: An Historical,
Economic, and Philosophical Analysis"**

Anarcho

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1. Introduction

In his essay, Caplan decides to expose the alleged secret statist nature of the Spanish Anarchist movement. He states that “many discussions of the Spanish Civil War overlook, minimize, or apologize for the atrocious behavior and tyrannical aspirations of perhaps the most powerful faction of Spanish Republicans: the Anarchist movement.”

It is, of course, true that some anarchists in Spain did act in atrocious ways and in non- (even anti-) anarchist ways. However, things are quite different from what Caplan claims in many cases. This rebuttal will indicate where Caplan’s biases lie and show how they undermine the objectivity of the evidence he selects and presents. In so doing, I shall indicate that Caplan’s “analysis” is lacking and that his thesis is wrong in all its major conclusions.

I shall make points in line with his headings and will concentrate on the parts with which I disagree and present evidence that disproves his claims. This means that many of his statements are apparently “ignored,” but only in the sense we do not wish to quote extensively just to state “we agree with this.” Like all myths, Caplan’s “analysis” does contain elements of truth. However, as will be proved, in the end his case falls apart in light of all the facts.

In producing this critique of Caplan’s work, I was reminded of the following words by Albert Meltzer:

“The fact is that Liberal-Democracy seldom voices any arguments against Anarchism as such — other than relying on prejudice — because its objections are purely authoritarian and unmask the innate Statism and authoritarianism of liberalism. Nowadays conservatives like to appropriate the name ‘libertarianism’ to describe themselves as if they were more receptive to freedom than socialists. But their libertarianism is confined to keeping the State out of interfering in their business affairs. Once anarchism makes it plain that it is possible to have both social justice and to dispense with the State they are shown in their true colours. Their arguments against State socialism and Communism may sound ‘libertarian’, but their arguments against Anarchism reveal that they are essentially authoritarian. That is why they prefer to rely upon innuendo, slanders, and false reporting, which is part of the establishment anti-anarchism, faithfully supported by the media.” [**Anarchism: Arguments for and against**, pp. 46–48]

Unfortunately, Caplan’s work proves his point. I hope to prove that Caplan’s work is mostly false reporting, based upon selective presentation of evidence in order to paint a radically false picture of the Spanish Anarchist movement. In this I think that Caplan is more motivated by ideology than by objectivity. For example, when discussing the activities of Spanish Anarchists he constantly takes those anarchists who act in non-libertarian ways as “typical” and so ignores the vast majority who did stick to their principles – for example, he seems to consider that the few anarchists who committed assassinations after July 19th, 1936, as more typical of Spanish Anarchism than the many others who did not commit murders. This in itself suggests that his

“case” is somewhat lacking, but I suppose its easier to concentrate on the few who “make the headlines” than the majority who spent their time creating collectives, at the front or spent their time educating others about the need for freedom and co-operation and what anarchism is.

Also, before going on, I will state here that I oppose the CNTs decision to collaborate with the government against the greater evil of fascism. I agree with the vast majority of anarchist writers on this subject that the first and greatest mistake of the Spanish anarchist movement was the mistaken belief that they could work with one side of capitalism (the democratic state) against another (fascism). As the history of the compromise proves, the struggle against fascism is best achieved by also fighting the system that created it (capitalism). The real alternative facing the CNT-FAI was not “the war or the revolution” but “revolutionary war or defeat”.

Finally, I dedicate this to all individuals who desire a free society and who do not blind themselves with ideology when looking at the past or at the present. Liberty requires a mind free from ideology and so with the ability to think for itself.

2. History and the Spanish Anarchists

A. The Militants and Terror

Caplan starts with the following: “In July of 1936, officers throughout Spain tried to orchestrate a coup detat against the Republican government. In Catalonia, Aragon, and other areas, Anarchist militants defeated the military uprisings. Finding themselves more powerful than the regional governments and possibly the central government, the Spanish Anarchists seized the moment to implement some radical changes in those regions of Spain where they had a large following.

“One of these radical changes was to beginning large-scale murders of people believed to be supporters of the Nationalists. In most cases, these supporters had taken no specific action to assist the Nationalist rebellion; they were singled out for their beliefs, or what people guessed their beliefs were.”

Firstly, the statement that the anarchist militants “implemented” the radical change of “large-scale murders” of Nationalists is somewhat loaded (to say the least). This suggests that the CNT-FAI policy was “implemented” at this time and nothing could be further from the truth. It is commonly agreed by historians that the wave of assassinations that occurred in the three months after the uprising was “at bottom a spontaneous movement, corresponding to the necessities of a revolutionary war, where the enemy within may be as dangerous as the enemy outside.” [Gerald Brenan, **The Spanish Labyrinth**, p. 318] As we note later, all the libertarian organisations officially opposed assassinations and acted to stop them. Therefore to say that one of the “radical changes” that “Anarchist militants” introduced was “large-scale murder” is simply false. Yes, **some** anarchist militants took part in assassinations, the vast majority did not. Notice how Caplan takes the few as “typical”, not the majority.

It should also be pointed out here that the use of the words “large-scale murders” does not present a fair picture of the level of the killings. In Burnett Bolloten’s book, **The Grand Camouflage**, page 41, Diego Abad de Santillan is quoted as saying:

“It is possible our victory resulted in the death by violence of four or five thousand inhabitants of Catalonia who were listed as rightists and were linked to political or ecclesiastical reaction.”

Given that the population of Catalonia was nearly 3 million in 1936, a figure of 5,000 deaths hardly amounts to “large-scale” murder by any means. Perhaps he meant that it was 5,000 too many, in which case I would agree – the assassination of unarmed individuals is not a libertarian act, even in the face of a fascist coup. However, Caplan’s use of the expression does present a certain mental image to the reader, as intended. However, to see whether this picture is true or not, it is important understanding in what context and **why** these murders took place otherwise a distinctly **false** image will be created. As we will prove, these murders occurred mostly as acts of revenge by individuals and small groups and as a result of the total breakdown of ‘law and order’.

Perhaps, to get a better picture of the context of the wave of assassinations in Catalonia, we should contrast what occurred there with the events in Zaragoza. Zaragoza, in Aragon, was a CNT stronghold. The town had 20,000 CNT members. Unlike the CNT in Barcelona, the CNT believed the words of the Popular Front government and did not arm themselves by direct action. The solid general strike by the CNT failed and the fascists used the city's Bull rings to organise the murder of 3,000 anti-fascists, mostly CNT members. Franco's regime was backed by capitalists inside and outside Spain.

In other words, the forces supported by capitalists murdered almost as many people **in one town** as the armed population did in the whole of Catalonia. After Franco won the civil war, he murdered tens of thousands more (probably hundreds of thousands) and produced a nation into which capitalists happily invested. As capitalists have discovered across the world, terror is an effective means of ensuring high profits and employer power.

Caplan then quotes Oliver and De Santillan about these murders in which they indicate that they were the result of arming an oppressed population. He then states that "De Santillan's comment typifies the Spanish Anarchists' attitude toward his movement's act of murder of several thousand people for their political views: it is a mere 'natural phenomenon,' nothing to feel guilty over." However, as noted, De Santillan is pointing out the facts of what happened. Is he to "feel guilty" for actions which members of his organisation committed and which he had no power to stop? As one historian points out "Barcelona was convulsed by a wave of random killings" by "execution gangs" some of whom had links to political and union organisations. [Benjamin Martin, **The Agony of Modernization**, p. 385] According to one eye-witness "The libertarians controlled all the most important 'secretariats' – but in reality power lay still in the streets." [**Blood of Spain**, p. 143] Another states that "There was a deep, very deep wave of popular fury as a result of the military uprising which followed on so many years of oppression and provocation." [Op. Cit., p. 151]

In other words, after years of violent repression by the state and capitalists, in the face of a military uprising, backed by these same elements, which aimed to create a fascist state, many people, **some** of whom were members of libertarian organisations, took the "law" into their own hands. This accurately sums up the nature of the murders – essentially revenge killings by small groups and individuals, some of whom were members of the anarchist movement. Caplan, however, ignores this fact and instead suggests that the CNT-FAI organised these deaths ("his movement's act of murder") while in fact they occurred outside of anyone's control.

To quote a Basque Nationalist, a Republican and a Catholic on the nature of the terror in Republican Spain:

"Blood, a great deal of innocent blood was shed on both sides... But the most radical difference as far as the Republican zone was concerned – which does not justify, but at least explains, the excesses – lies in the very fact of the [military] insurrection. The army, almost the entire secret police, the administration of justice, whatever police forces there were, whose duty it was to maintain order, revolted, leaving the legal government defenceless. The latter was compelled to arm the people, the jails were opened to release friendly political prisoners, and the common-law criminals who came out with them acted on their own account. Furthermore, with the stirring up of the lower depths of society, the malefactors that exist in every city, in every nation, came to the surface, and found an easy field for their work...Is it surprising

that during the first days of the revolt these uncontrolled elements dispensed justice in a rude and elementary fashion, the justice of men who had suffered and had been moulded in an atmosphere of hatred? All this does not justify the crimes committed in the Republican zone, but it readily explains them.” [**The Spanish Civil War**, p. 53]

In other words, the anarchists can hardly be blamed for the fascist coup and the social breakdown which occurred after it, nor for the actions during that time of individual CNT and FAI members acting on their own initiative.

Caplan goes on to claim that “Political belief was not the only kind of heterodoxy which the Spanish Anarchists refused to tolerate.” This is a strange statement, since members of the UGT, republicans, socialists and communists were not singled out for repression. The shootings were often motivated by revenge or were murders of supporters of the fascist coup i.e. those who desired to create a totalitarian regime in Spain like those in Italy and Germany. The Spanish Anarchists were well aware what their fate would have been if the coup had succeeded. Given this obvious fact, we can state that Caplan’s claim of lack of tolerance for political opinions on the part of the Spanish Anarchist movement is simply false. In other words, Caplan’s statement is hardly an accurate account of the situation. Moreover, even when we look at repression directed towards the right, capitalists and landlords we discover that Caplan’s claims are simply false. Rather than being directed towards everyone who did not agree with them, the repression was directed towards those who had taken part in the fascist coup. According to Gabriel Jackson “[i]n Catalonia and the Levant the anarchists arrested many a landlord and monarchist on the assumption that he had probably backed the rising, but most of these people were released when the evidence, and the testimony of villagers who had known them for years, indicated that they had had nothing to do with the rising.” He goes on, “[i]n Andalusia the villagers often arrested such people immediately. Most of them, far from being shot, were released by the invading army” and in Aragon there are “many testimonials to the intervention of Durruti personally to prevent the killing of landlords who had not aided the rising.” [**The Spanish Republic and the Civil War: 1931–1939**, p. 532, p. 292]

Thus Caplan’s claims that the Spanish anarchist have little tolerance for other opinions have little, if any, basis in the evidence. The assassinations that did occur seem to have been mostly related to the role people played in the fascist rising and personal revenge (the role of released criminals, fascists and of the police and army proving their loyalty to the Republic in the wave of murders is obviously a difficult one to empirically prove but one I am sure played an important role in these days).

The main reason for the many revenge killings can be traced to the many years of capitalist repression of the working class that had preceded the revolution, a period during which bosses and factory owners had routinely hired gunmen, *pistoleros*, to assassinate labour leaders and break strikes by the most brutal methods (see below) and the police regularly operated a “shot when trying to escape” policy against anarchists and union members. It is hardly surprising that those who had family members or close friends killed by the ruling class and their hired thugs seized the opportunity to settle old scores. Reading Caplan, one would have no inkling of this reason for the killings. This leads us to suspect that Caplan’s purpose in this essay is to make the anarchists look as bad as possible, hiding the facts where necessary.

And we must note that the CNT-FAI as organisations opposed the wave of revenge killings and acted to stop them. According to **Blood of Spain** [page 149] “leading CNT militants, like Joan Peiro, fulminated openly against such actions” and “both the CNT and FAI issued statements categorically condemning assassinations” The FAI stated: “we must put an end to these excesses.” “Anyone proven to have infringed people’s rights would be shot — a threat which was carried out when some anarcho-syndicalist militants were executed.” Hugh Thomas notes that from the 25th of July, the CNT and FAI launched a series of protests against illegal violence” and that in Jaen “the anarchists stopped the indiscriminate killings and often the gangs concerned were people of no real political beliefs.” [**The Spanish Civil War**, p. 277, p. 279]

Another example is the following statement issued by the FAI on July 30th:

“We declare coldly, with terrible calm and with full intention to act, that if the irresponsible people who are spreading terror throughout Barcelona do not stop, we will shoot every individual who is proven to have acted against the rights of the people. Every individual so charged by the CNT or FAI will be tried before a commission composed of elements of the anti-fascist front. And Barcelona knows, and Spain and the entire world know, that the men of the FAI never fail to carry out their promises.” [Quoted in Gomez Casas’ **Anarchist Organisation : The history of the FAI**, p. 190]

And let’s not forget that Fraser states that “it should be noted that in Barcelona and elsewhere the FAI was automatically blamed for assassinations and crimes” [p. 148] Seems like Caplan is following in this tradition as well as ignoring the extensive evidence which refutes his claims.

Caplan then goes on to blame the CNT and FAI for **every** act of repression against the Church, ignoring the fact that attacks on the Church had occurred during every previous popular revolt in Spain. In other words, the Church was not a well-liked institution, because it took the side of the ruling class, and people took advantage of every opportunity to destroy it. This can be seen from the fact that “Protestant churches were not attacked” [Hugh Thomas, **The Spanish Civil War**, p. 269f] and suggest, rather than a result of anarchist anti-religious feeling, the repression against the church was a popular wave of protest against the reactionary nature of the Catholic church and its support for state and capitalist oppression, exploitation and repression against the working class (as Fraser notes, “From the preceding period of absolutism, the church provided the ideological categories to justify the repression and intolerance necessary to maintain the system” p. 525). Of course, **some** anarchists did take part in church burning but to claim that anarchists were responsible for the majority of such acts cannot be proved either way (and, of course, many anarchists opposed the firing of churches and the assassinations of priests).

After stating, without evidence, that “it is clear that Anarchist militants were at the vanguard of the murder squads on the Republican side” he continues and asks:

“In any case, whether the murders were centrally ordered, completely decentralized, or (as is most likely) somewhere in between, what difference does it make?”

In other words, are the CNT-FAI to be blamed for all the actions its members did (even the ones which they had no power to stop)? Caplan obviously thinks the answer is yes. Thus he states: “Does it matter if the widespread Nazi attacks on Jews known as the Kristallnacht were centrally

organized or ‘spontaneous’? No; if an ideology categorizes many people as sub-human, urging ever greater brutality, and recommending restraint only when it is tactically convenient, it is perfectly reasonable to castigate the entire movement centering around that ideology, whether that movement be Nazism or Spanish anarchism.”

Did Spanish Anarchism categorise members of the ruling class as “sub-human”? No, they were described as exploiters and oppressors, a description that even a cursory examination of the history of Spanish capitalism would reveal to be quite accurate. Caplan then states that “[i]t is quite clear that the rhetoric of the Spanish anarchists focused on crushing the enemies of the workers by any means necessary; making sure that the rights of innocent people who happened to despise everything Anarchism stood for was simply not on their agenda.” And he quotes Fraser’s interview of Juan Moreno, a CNT day-labourer:

“We hated the bourgeoisie, they treated us like animals. They were our worst enemies. When we looked at them we thought we were looking at the devil himself. And they thought the same of us.”

Does the fact that the bourgeoisie treated workers “like animals” merit comment by Caplan? No, it does not. Does he mention that part of treating the workers “like animals” involved a twenty-year reign of terror in which labour leaders were routinely beaten up and brutally murdered? No, not a word. Does he criticise the capitalists for hating the workers just as much as the workers hated them? No. Obviously, capitalists categorising and treating workers as animals is okay, (as is hating them) while workers’ returning that feeling toward capitalists is evil and wrong. In Caplan’s view, the workers’ hatred toward their masters was created solely by “Anarchist ideology.” Could it be, however, that in reality it was the capitalist **system**, defended by Caplan, which created a class of people whose authority resulted in other people being “treated like animals,” and that these others, strangely enough, resented their treatment and hated their oppressors? Reading Caplan one gets the impression that such a result is perfectly natural and so unworthy of comment.

And did the **capitalists** in Spain “make sure of the rights of innocent people” who happened to be anarchists? Not at all. Anarchists were rounded up by the fascists, undoubtedly identified with the help of bosses. Again, one searches in vain for any mention of the years of repression directed against the anarchist movement as an explanation for the revenge killings. One wonders, for example, why Caplan does not quote Ronald Fraser’s **Blood of Spain**, a work with which he is familiar:

“After the economic boom of the First World War and increasing proletarian militancy, Catalan employers confronted lean times by attempting to crush the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Barcelona. The crushing took the form of creating ‘yellow’ unions and...the hiring of gunmen to assassinate CNT leaders.” [p. 547]

Where was the concern for “individual rights” then? Perhaps the assassinations after July 19th were a case of reaping what had been sown? If you treat people like animals, oppress them, hate them, it can hardly be unsurprising that they settle the score when they get the chance? Needless to say, Caplan ignores the extensive evidence of anarchists protecting “class enemies,” particularly ones that treated their workers fairly and as human beings and those who had not joined in the fascist uprising.

Also, we must note, Caplan ignores the bloody and violent repression directed against the miners revolt in north-west Spain in 1934, headed by General Franco. This resulted in 1500–2000 dead, many of the deaths occurring after the end of the fighting. And, indeed, the violent repression directed against CNT organised insurrections and strikes all through the 1930s and before.

So, quite possibly, being treated like an animal and seeing one's fellow CNT members assassinated by capitalists would have had a serious impact on how one viewed the bourgeoisie. However, class hatred only seems to matter when it's members of the working class who do the hating.

Caplan sums up by stating that “In short, it is perfectly just to impugn the Anarchist movement as a whole for the numerous atrocities of its members, because these actions flowed logically from the central ideas of the movement rather than their misinterpretation by extreme fringe groups.” In other words, capitalist murder and repression does not matter, it is the reaction to it by anarchists and workers that that counts. Their violence shows that the blame really lies with “Anarchist ideology,” which Caplan apparently believes should have conditioned workers to accept their oppression with patient resignation. How very “objective!”

Therefore, given the picture of the social context of the murders that occurred in the Republican zone after July 19th, Caplan's “conclusion” can be seen to be totally wrong. It is **not** “perfectly just” to impugn the anarchist movement for the reactions of some of its members to years of oppression, beatings and assassinations by the supporters of capitalism. In addition, as indicated, the CNT-FAI acted to stop assassinations and murders. Caplan, in order to make his “case” must distort history. Few, except die-hard anti-anarchists, could take his case seriously.

B. The Leaders and Collaboration

Caplan next states that “public records concerning the Anarchist leadership's record of collaboration with the central and regional governments throughout Spain provides ample documentation of a long series of abuses and betrayals of what good principles the Anarchist movement held dear.”

This is very true. However the reason for these abuses and betrayals is not mentioned. This handily creates an impression that the CNT-FAI were just “secret statist” all along. Unfortunately for Caplan, this is not the case, as the overwhelming reason for the long series of abuses and betrayals is the fact that a fascist coup had occurred and there was a need to stop it. It is hardly surprising that many in the CNT and FAI considered fascism to be a serious threat. Caplan's failure to mention this little fact suggests that the threat posed by fascism does not weigh very heavily in his mind. In this he follows those many capitalists, both in and outside of Spain, who supported fascism.

He then presents the discredited claim that the FAI acted like a dictatorship and controlled the CNT. This claim was started by the dissident treintista CNT members when they were replaced by the more radical anarchists in union elections (see **Anarchist Organisation: The History of the FAI**). If the FAI members **did** “impose their decisions...” against the wishes of the CNT membership, then why was the CNT a mass organisation? And why did only 35,000 workers join the treintista union split? The simple fact is that the more radical anarchists and syndicalists convinced their fellow workers of their ideas and they elected them to union positions.

He goes to say that “[w]hile the CNT and especially the FAI repeatedly condemned political participation before the Civil War, it was extraordinarily easy to induce CNT leaders to accept ministerial positions in the central government.” Could the war against fascism and the need for weapons and support for industry not have something to do with it? It’s very true that power corrupts, even anarchists, and this can be seen from the desire of many “anarchists” to join any government after the initial compromises had been made.

Caplan correctly quotes Bolloten when he later notes that “Not only did this decision [to join the government] represent a complete negation of the basic tenets of Anarchism, shaking the whole structure of libertarian theory to the core, but, in violation of democratic principle, it had been taken without consulting the rank and file.” Again, all the anarchists who have written on this subject have argued the same point. The rank and file should have been fully consulted. However, and this point is important, the fact that the rank and file did not oppose the decision says that the decision was not at odds with desires of the CNT membership. This is confirmed by the fact the rank and file agreed to return to work and leave the streets during the May Days when asked to by the CNT leadership and by the fact that a sizeable minority of anarchists opposed collaboration and activity put its ideas across to the rest of the CNT membership. For example, “Ruta, the mouthpiece of the Libertarian Youth of Catalonia, had been opposed to the CNT’s collaborationism since November 1936” [Agustin Guillamon, **The Friends of Durruti Group: 1937–1937**, p. 43] and the Friends of Durruti themselves held well attended public meetings during the Spring of 1937 in Barcelona. Neither, after the May Days, could the CNT leadership expel the Friends of Durruti because they “never could get that measure ratified by any assembly of unions” [op. cit., p. 61]. And, again, I must add these other examples of the CNT decision making process during the Civil War:

“At a conference of local unions in Barcelona, the leadership sought and obtained the support of the unions to continue to collaborate with the government of Catalonia after the May Days. However, the unions refused to withhold financial support for the Libertarian Youth, who opposed the policy of collaboration vigorously in their publications. And the unions also refused to call upon the transit workers not to distribute these opposition publications in the public transit system, or the milk drivers to stop distributing the Libertarian Youth papers together with the daily milk.

And then I saw a Libertarian Youth conference which was prepared to vote almost unanimously to condemn without debate the policy of government collaboration. However, the chairman insisted that supporters of collaboration be given a chance to speak and be heard. I saw six young men go to the platform and argue earnestly and eloquently for their viewpoint. There were no interruptions, no booing. The vote remained almost unanimous in favour of opposing collaboration.” [Abe Bluestein, introduction to **Anarchist Organisation : The History of the F.A.I.**]

Therefore, Caplan is correct to state that the decision to join the government was made without consulting the rank and file (particularly at the front, where the majority of militant anarchists actually were) but the decisions were reached at various local and national plenums, plenums (as I noted above) which could not have forced unions to go along with decisions they opposed. Therefore, to state that the rank and file were not consulted is correct (they should have been) but the fact is that if the majority of union members had not supported that decision then the

decision would not have been allowed to happen. Obviously the majority of the CNT supported the policy of collaboration against the greater evil of fascism, as can be seen from the support the CNT leadership continued to have and the failure of the union assemblies to expel the Friends of Durruti or withhold financial support to the Libertarian Youth.

So, yes, Caplan is correct to state that the rank and file was not consulted, but he is wrong to leave it at that. The various union, collective, militia, etc. assemblies and plenums (distorted as they were due to the circumstances of the war) provided a voice for the rank and file, a rank and file who were subject to arguments against collaboration by a significant minority of anarchists. Strangely enough, the rank and file seemed to have viewed collaboration in the government as a necessary evil in order to win the war and were not convinced by the anarchist minority within their ranks who disagreed with that policy. Perhaps Periat's sums up the process best when he writes that "[c]ertainly, circumstances required quick decisions from the organisation, and it was necessary to take precautions to prevent damaging leaks. These necessities tempted the committees to abandon the federalist procedures of the organisation." [Jose Periat's, **Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution**, p. 188] Periat's criticism's of the CNT (like most anarchist writers) are far more critical than Caplan's, and also (unlike his) place these criticism's in the context of the civil war.

Caplan continues: "Anarchists were even more eager to assume governmental powers in Catalonia, where they were strong enough to overshadow the regional Catalonia government, the Generalitat. Rather than officially enter the Catalonian government, the Anarchists chose to retain the Generalitat as a legal cover; but real power shifted into the hands of the Anarchist-controlled Central Anti-Fascist Militia Committee..It should be further noted that these Anarchist-run councils and committees were not mild-mannered minimal states, maintaining order while allowing the workers to organize themselves as they pleased. They were modern states, concerning themselves with the economy, education, propaganda, transportation, and virtually everything else."

Unfortunately, this hypothesis fails to explain how the creation of the collectives occurred outside the control of the Militia Committee. Thus, the Committee **did** leave workers to organise themselves — that is, education, transportation and so on were organised by the workers involved. As for propaganda, the CNT and FAI had its own presses and radio stations. In other words, while the Militia Committee did "intervene" in the economy, the reorganisation of that economy was going on beyond its control. It also seems strange to think that this body, set up to organise resistance to the fascist coup, should **not** have taken a "pro-active" stance. Perhaps Caplan thinks that market forces would have organised, armed, and fed the militias after the total social breakdown from July 19th?

He then writes:

"The Anarchists' position in both the central government and in Catalonia slowly but surely declined after their entered into coalition governments with the other anti-Franco factions."

In other words, the CNT was powerless in the face of political parties who considered defeating the revolution to be more important than defeating fascism. And if the CNT was secretly totalitarian and as powerful as Caplan implies, why did it join these coalitions as a minority? It's pretty clear that for a "totalitarian" organisation, the CNT acted in a strange ways, joining with

other political parties, unions, and so on as a minority, and as a result, to see whatever position it had decline.

Next, Caplan states the obvious: “While the members of the CNT who held positions in the Catalonian government kept trying to reach an understanding with their fellow ministers, the rank and file Anarchists seem to have become increasingly alienated from their leaders.” He then maintains that “A raid on the Anarchist-controlled telephone company brought these feelings to the surface. (The non-Anarchists’ objected to the Anarchists’ use of wiretaps to listen in on important conversations.) The CNT ministers merely demanded the removal of the main people responsible for the raid; but hundreds of the rank-and-file Anarchists responded with rage, setting up barricades.”

Where to start? Firstly, the telephone company was run under workers’ control by a joint CNT-UGT committee. The non-Anarchists objected to workers listening in on important conversations within the government. Personally, I prefer the “open government” this implies. Or should the governed not listen in on such conversations?

Caplan then notes, correctly, that “The Anarchist leadership was... out of step with the rank-and-file; they urged the militants to stop the fighting. Their requests were not heeded.” But he does not mention that before “reinforcements from the central government arrived and firmly placed power into the hands of the Generalitat,” the workers of the CNT did leave the barricades and go back to work. The reinforcements arrived after “the city was almost back to normal” [Fraser, p. 382]. Which raises the question: **why** did the CNT workers follow their leaders? The fact that they did seems to indicate some support for them, in spite of the numerous compromises. Given the pressing need for unity against the Fascists, we can understand why the rank and file of the CNT returned to work – we may not agree with it, but we can understand it. Therefore, it can be stated that support for the CNT and FAI was still strong within the Catalan working class, inspite of the actions of the union’s leadership.

After discussing the communist repression against the anarchists, Caplan states that “Even though many Anarchists eventually realized that the defeat of Franco would lead to the establishment of a Soviet satellite state, they kept fighting. Clearly the Anarchists’ opposition to the Nationalists dwarfed their distaste for Leninist totalitarianism.”

The “Nationalists,” it should be noted, were the fascists. Simply put, if the fascists did win, what was left of the CNT militia would have been disarmed (not to mention murdered, Franco’s regime killed hundreds of thousands of anti-nationalists during and after the war). At least by fighting on the Republican side, they would still have had arms at the end. Obviously this consideration meant that their opposition to fascist totalitarianism (which was what “the Nationalists” represented) dwarfed their “distaste” for the Leninist form.

Caplan then discusses the negotiations between the “new clandestine secretary general of the CNT, Jose Leiva, in Madrid, with the Falange, stating that “This was the Anarchism of the CNT: an Anarchism which not only allied with the Communist totalitarians, but attempted to strike a deal with the Fascist totalitarians six years after the end of the civil war.” As if the great majority of CNT militants who came back to Spain to re-organise the CNT and try to assassinate Franco would have agreed with this activity! Simply put, Caplan’s suggestion that this negotiation reflects the anarchism of the CNT is utter nonsense, unworthy of an objective historian (and typical, I may add, to his continual tendency to take the actions of a minority of anarchists are “typical” while remaining silence about the majority). However, as indicated, Caplan is anything **but** objective. (Nor, may I add, does Caplan denounce the many capitalists who supported Franco

and invested in Spain once his regime had slaughtered hundreds of thousands of trade unionists, anarchists, socialists, etc. Obviously capitalists making deals with fascism is perfectly acceptable, which indicates that **real** capitalists are more than happy to support fascism if the returns are high enough — “convinced of where its real interests lay, international capital subscribed to the nationalist war effort in no uncertain manner” Fraser, p. 279).

Of course, there are many examples of right-libertarians supporting the Fascist totalitarians in Pinochet’s Chile, with which we could make similar criticisms about the “anarchism” of “anarcho” capitalism. However, there are plenty of other areas in “anarcho”-capitalist theory and practice that show up its claim to be anarchistic to be utterly false.

C. The Urban Collectives

Here Caplan discusses the CNT urban collectives, starting with the CNT policy of closing down many small plants. “What is odd,” he writes, “is that in the midst of massive unemployment the Anarchists closed down a large percentage of the remaining firms.” Could the reason be, perhaps, that much of the plant which was closed down was unhygienic or unsafe and so on? Obviously, as a supporter of capitalism, Caplan does not regard workers’ safety as an issue.

Moving on, Caplan states that “initially, the workers (rather than an Anarchist nomenklatura) usually assumed control over their places of employment... Yet government control quickly followed. In October, the government of Anarchist-dominated Catalonia passed the Collectivization and Workers’ Control Decree, which legally recognized many of the de facto collectivizations.” We should point out that this government was not anarchist-dominated, and the collectivisation decree was a compromise between the forces represented in that government. However, as both Fraser and Bollothen point out, the decree was often ignored in practice.

Caplan goes on to note anarchist opposition to this decree and to discuss a “loophole” in it. The loophole was that “firms had to pay a percentage of their *profits*. To eliminate the exaction, one merely need eliminate the profits. With worker control, there is a simple way to do this: keep raising wages until the “profits” disappear. Taxes on profits – which is what the Decree amounted to – will raise revenue if the workers and the owners are different people; but with worker control such taxes are simple to evade. Witness after witness reports the abolition of piece-work, better working conditions, lavish non-wage compensation, and so on. This is initially surprising; if the workers run the factory, don’t they pay the price of hampering production?”

Of course Caplan obviously puts all these improvements down to the desire of workers not to pay taxes. The idea that better working conditions, the abolition of piece work, etc. came about because the workers did not desire to work in the bad, demeaning conditions imposed by capitalists does not enter his head. Nor, of course, the massive disruption of the Catalan economy by the war does not even factor into Caplan’s “thesis” – all the evidence suggests that difficulties in getting raw materials, access to markets, etc. played a key role in the Catalan economy. However, to back his thesis with some evidence Caplan must indicate that profits existed between July and September 1936 (i.e. before the “profits tax” was introduced). However, there is no evidence that states “we had profits until September then there wasn’t any.” In other words, Caplan’s thesis has no basis in fact and the most obvious thesis (namely workers’ desired to have decent working conditions and the disruption of the economy caused by the war reducing profits) looks far stronger.

Looking over the results of collectivisation, Caplan states that “[i]n short, after being told that the workers now owned the means of production, the workers often took the statement literally. What is the point of owning the means of production if you can’t get rich using them? But of course if some workers get rich, they are unlikely to voluntarily donate their profits to the other members of their class.”

The unstated assumption, of course, is that getting rich is the only motivation people have. Perhaps to a capitalist, this premise is “self-evidently” true, but according to the accounts of Augustine Souchy, Gaston Leval, Jose Peirats, and other eyewitnesses, there was a remarkable spirit of co-operation in most of the collectives. It should also be pointed out that if people are “unlikely to voluntarily donate their profits,” then the standard “anarcho” capitalist claim that charities will boom in their system does not hold water. But as “anarcho” capitalism is based on telling people what they want to hear, that’s hardly surprising.

Caplan goes on to state the following:

“Bolloten repeats a remark of CNT militia leader Ricardo Sanz: “[T]hings are not going as well as they did in the early days of the [revolutionary] movement... The workers no longer think of working long hours to help the front. They only think of working as little as possible and getting the highest possible wages.” Bolloten attributes this decline in enthusiasm to Communist repression, but it is at least as consistent with the simple observation that people often prefer improving their own lot in life to nourishing revolution. “

Or could it be that they had seen the revolution destroyed and so did not care how the war would end? Improving their own lot and nourishing revolution need not be incompatible. As this quote is from after May 1937, it is likely that the communist repression did have an effect on the spirit of the workers in Spain. And, as Caplan documents below, the economy of Catalonia was under great strain because of the war. Hardly surprising if people facing great economic difficulties start to concentrate on their own survival regardless of wider issues.

Editorialising further, Caplan states that “[i]n short, practical experience gradually revealed a basic truth of economics for which theoretical reflection would have sufficed: if the workers take over a factory, they will run it to benefit themselves. A worker-run firm is essentially identical to a capitalist firm in which the workers also happen to be the stockholders. Once they came to this realization, however dimly, the Spanish Anarchists had to either embrace capitalism as the corollary of worker control, or else denounce worker control as the corollary of capitalism. For the most part, they chose the latter course.”

This is false. There is no denying that workers will run a workplace for their own benefit. This is obvious. However, this is not the whole story. Could not workers also see the need for co-operation beyond the workplace and support the end of capitalism in their own self-interest? Of course, this was the CNT policy of “socialisation” (as opposed to nationalisation) which Caplan refers to as “call[ing] absolute dictatorship by a different name.” But if inter-workplace organisation is “absolute dictatorship,” then many capitalist firms can also be classed as such. Hence, if democratic union control is “absolute dictatorship,” what does that make the anti-democratic capitalist company? Caplan does not ask the question, strangely enough.

And, as should be obvious, a worker-run firm is **not** “essentially identical” to a capitalist firm because in a worker-run firm workers control their own activity themselves. In other words,

there is no hierarchical forms of authority within the workplace and so, unlike a capitalist firm, is far more anarchistic. This explains the long standing anarchist support for co-operatives. Of course, as Caplan himself points out, capitalism is **not** the “corollary” of workers control as he argues that wage labour and investors would appear – in other words, capitalism will destroy workers control in favour of control of workers by capitalists. A strange “corollary”!

And I think these words by Proudhon (from **The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century**) indicate well that a worker-run firm is **not** “essentially identical” to a capitalist one. Proudhon argues that employees are “subordinated, exploited” and their “permanent condition is one of obedience,” a “slave” within a capitalist firm [p. 216] Indeed, capitalist companies “plunder the bodies and souls of wage workers” and they are “an outrage upon human dignity and personality.” [p. 218] However, in a co-operative the situation changes and the worker is an “associate” and “forms a part of the producing organisation ... [and] forms a part of the sovereign power, of which he was before but the subject.” [p. 216] Without co-operation and association, “the workers ... would remain related as subordinates and superiors, and there would ensue two industrial castes of masters and wage-workers, which is repugnant to a free and democratic society.” [p. 216]

Therefore, Caplan’s claim that the issue of “dividends” is the key to understanding the nature of co-operatives totally misses the point. It seems strange that an self-proclaimed “anarchist” is more concerned about who gets the dividend than about the authority relations within an association. This indicates well that “anarcho”-capitalism is **not** anarchist, its opposition to **archy** is so limited as to be non-existent. As Proudhon, and those anarchists who followed him realised, is that the issue of who runs the workplace is a key one in determining whether a system is socialist or not (along with, I must note, whether there is separate class of owners who get a slice of the workers profits – in other words, whether capitalist exploitation exists). As the collectives had workers control and provided no profits for a capitalist class, then they were most definitely socialistic and not capitalistic.

He quotes Bollothen as follows: “In the opinion of the anarcho-syndicalists, socialization would eliminate the dangers of government control by placing production in the hands of the unions. This was the libertarian conception of socialization, without state intervention, that was to eliminate the wastes of competition and duplication, render possible industrywide planning for both civilian and military needs, and halt the growth of selfish actions among the workers of the more prosperous collectives by using their profits to raise the standard of living in the less favored enterprises.”

It should be noted that this policy of socialisation existed **before** the revolution and was based on workers control. Therefore, as “evidence” that the anarchists “denounced” workers control as the problems of collectivisation became clear is hardly convincing. The socialised industries were still organised by workplace assemblies and elected management committees. In other words, socialisation was built and based upon workers control and so Caplan’s statement is **false**.

Bollothen’s quote indicates that the long standing CNT policy of socialisation called for co-operation between workplaces based on democratic workers control. Caplan then states that “Of course, one could refuse to call a union with such fearsome powers a ‘state,’ but it would need all of the enforcement apparatus and authority of a state to execute its objectives. The ‘more prosperous collectives,’ for example, would be unlikely to submit voluntarily to industrywide planning funded by their profits.”

If this was the case, then the same problem afflicts the capitalist company (particularly one with multiple workplaces). Why should a workplace submit to the funding of stockholders? Hence capitalism needs an enforcement apparatus and authority of a state, particularly as the workplace is not democratic. So, if socialisation is “absolute dictatorship,” so is capitalism (and capitalist firms, unlike collectives, are not democratic internally). We doubt that Caplan would accept such a statement, however.

Caplan then states that the “Nationalists conquered Catalonia before the government made any concerted, official effort to nationalize the workers’ factories.” However, this is somewhat false as after the May Days, the position of the collectives changed. According to Fraser in **Blood of Spain**, “the PSUC, faced still with a militant CNT working class, attempted rather to centralise the collectives under Generalitat (or PSUC) control from June 1937... [they] modified many essential aspects of the collectivisation decree [which the CNT ignored anyway – IM] ... Such modifications could have paved the way for a later move from centralisation to nationalisation.” [p. 578]

Fraser is clear, the Stalinists centralised power away from the collectives into the states hands. Within the workplace, mass assemblies and elected management committees no longer run the workplace nor had a say in any industrial bodies that existed. In other words, Caplan gets the facts wrong and implies a situation within the Catalan economy radically different from the facts. In other words, the government **had** made official efforts to start the process of nationalisation before the fascists took Catalonia. A process, I may add, which had started well before June 1937 but which the May Days ensured the outcome of.

After highlighting how the state used the lack of co-operation between many collectives to undermine and control the collectives, Caplan states that “The simplest way that the collectives could have avoided dependence on the government would have been to issue debt; in short, to borrow from the general public rather than the government. But undoubtedly the fear of revealing surplus wealth to lend would make such a scheme impossible. Even if their physical safety were not their concern, investors could hardly expect to ever get their money back. The insecurity of property rights thus made it very difficult to borrow from the public, so the collectives mortgaged themselves piece by piece to the government until finally the government rather than the workers owned the means of production.”

It should be noted that Caplan acknowledges, implicitly anyway, that capitalism needs a state to protect “property rights.” In other words, for capitalism to exist, a state must have enough power to ensure that workers do not take over and ignore the “rightful owners.” Caplan, against his intentions, indicates that capitalism can never be anarchistic. And I should note that in capitalist economies, industry finds about 90% plus of its funds from its own resources (e.g. in the USA, since 1952, internal funds covered 91% of capital expenditures, 96% from 1990) – an option which the collectives, struggling to survive in the difficult situation of the war time economy, had little chance to pursue. The issuing of stock play a minor, almost non-existent, role in generating income for companies. But what stock **does** do is allow a rich minority to control a countries economy and to enrich themselves at the expense of the many (in the words of Doug Henwood, author of **Wall Street** and editor of **Left Business Observer**, “Stock markets... [are] a way for the very rich as a class to own an economy’s productive capital stock as a whole, rather than being tied to the fate of a single firm... Stock markets, in Joan Robinson’s phrase, are “a convenience for rentiers”). So, far from protecting the collectives share issues would have seen the

workers (and society) become subject to the wishes of capitalists and workers control would have disappeared.

Caplan also acknowledges the basic anarchist point that co-operation between collectives would have ensured workers' control – in other words, that the “capitalistic” tendencies Caplan documents ended up in destroying freedom in the economy. In fact, the “simplest way” for the collectives to have survived would have been to socialise and work together. In this way they would have been in a position to determine their own fates instead of being slowly taken over by the state or a new capitalist class.

He notes that “almost all sources indicate that profits were almost non-existence; possibly, as I have indicated, because workers were smart enough to realize that raising their wages and improving working conditions was an easy route to avoid any profits tax.” Of course, workers improving their working conditions and raising their wages may have been due to the fact that the capitalists had paid them little for working in bad conditions before the revolution. And it should be noted that all the sources indicate that profits were almost non-existent **before** the decree as well. In other words, Caplan's thesis is based purely on ideology and not on fact.

I should also point out here that Caplan ignores one of the most common complaints within the collectivised economy during this time, namely lack of raw materials and funding. It is hard to produce profits when your workplace does not have enough raw materials to produce goods! However, this fact is ignored by Caplan in favour of his own theory.

Caplan then does discuss the possibilities of socialisation between collectives:

“Even if this could have prevented the collectives from becoming dependent on the central government, the end result would have been to make them dependent on a union so powerful that it would be a state in everything but name.”

But investors having property rights do need a state powerful enough to enforce their claims. In other words, even if we take Caplan's claims at face value, he has no option but to support the recreation of the state in order to protect property rights. As for the “powerful” union, that depends on what the workers decided to form. We doubt that co-operation between collectives would have created a “powerful” body above the collectives unless the collectives desired to create such a body (which is unlikely).

Caplan finishes by quoting Albert Perez-Baro, a civil servant and a former CNT member:

“This truly revolutionary measure [the 50 per cent profits tax] – though rarely, if ever, applied – wasn't well received by large numbers of workers, proving, unfortunately, that their understanding of the scope of collectivization was very limited. Only a minority understood that collectivization meant the return to society of what, historically, had been appropriated by the capitalists...”

Notice that Perez-Baro states that the profits tax was rarely, if ever applied. This suggests that the collectivisation policy was not enforced, meaning that workers saw that their “profits” would have been saved. However, such profits did not seem to exist even in the face of non-collection! So, I would suggest, that Caplan's “thesis” on the lack of profits is false.

Caplan then states: “In other words, most workers assumed that worker control meant that the workers would actually become the true owners of their workplaces, with all the rights and

privileges thereof. Only the elite realized that worker control was merely a euphemism for “social control” which in turn can only mean control by the state (or an Anarchist ‘council,’ ‘committee,’ or ‘union,’ satisfying the standard Weberian definition of the state).”

Funny how a minority of workers becomes “an elite” for Caplan. Could it be that he expects **all** workers to agree with him? Could it not be that many of the CNT membership who agreed to the policy of socialisation at their previous congresses had their own ideas of what workers’ control meant and tried to convince their fellow workers of it? Does having a different viewpoint mean you are part of an elite? No, it does not, but Caplan provides the right sort of “atmosphere” for twisting the quote.

So, how did this minority in favour of socialisation act? Did they impose their wishes on the majority by state action? No. Socialisation was not collectivisation and came about through discussion with the unions and workplaces. For example, Fraser notes that the stores were not socialised because the workers did not agree, whereas the woodworkers union did agree to socialisation because the minority originally in favour of it convinced the rest. Hardly examples of “an elite” running the economy.

Of course few anarchists expect an anarchist society to appear overnight. There will be a period in which left-overs from capitalism co-exist with aspects of anarchism. This is to be expected. However, Caplan by pointing out the obvious (namely that the collectives in Spain were **not** instantly anarchist) just shows the standard “anarcho” capitalist assumption that anarchists expect perfection instantly. Strangely enough this is another aspect of their ideas they share with Marxist-Leninists.

D. Militarization

Caplan starts by noting that “the Anarchist militias resisted it [militarization] vigorously because they took their ideals seriously.” However, he then claims that “[i]t did not take long for the Anarchist leadership to decide that military success was more important than the voluntaristic notions of the rank-and-file” and quotes Solidaridad Obrera as being in “favor of the strictest discipline”: “To accept discipline means that the decisions made by comrades assigned to any particular task, whether administrative or military, should be executed without any obstruction in the name of liberty, a liberty that in many cases degenerates into wantonness.”

Just to place this into context, I would wonder what Caplan would say if the workforce in a capitalist workplace decided to ignore the need for discipline, the need to co-ordinate joint activity, because it was created on a “voluntaristic” notion? Of course, in any joint activity discipline is required and in the context of a militia force at the front line, this is doubly true. Such support for discipline cannot be identified with the hierarchical control of a capitalist workplace or capitalist army, but instead is an attempt to ensure that when a militia attacks that it gets the required support from its neighbours, that weapons arrive on time and so on. George Orwell indicates in *Homage to Catalonia* the democratic nature of the “discipline” Solidaridad Obrera was recommending:

“At this time [late 1936] and until much later, the Catalan militias were still on the same basis they had been at the beginning of the war... until [June 1937]... the militia-system remained unchanged. The essential point of the system was social equality... In theory at any rate each militia was a democracy and not a hierarchy. It was

understood that orders had to be obeyed, but it was also to be understood that when you gave an order you gave it as comrade to comrade and not as superior to inferior. There were officers and N.C.O.s, but there was no military rank in the ordinary sense; no titles, no badges, no heel-clicking and saluting. They had attempted to produce within the militias a sort of temporary working model of the classless society. Of course there was not perfect equality, but there was a nearer approach to it than I had ever seen or than I would have thought conceivable in time of war.

“In practice the democratic ‘revolutionary’ type of discipline is more reliable than might be expected. In a workers’ army discipline is theoretically voluntary. It is based on class-loyalty, whereas the discipline of a bourgeois conscript army is based ultimately on fear... In the militias the bullying and abuse that go in an ordinary army would never have been tolerated for a moment. The normal military punishments existed, but they were only invoked for very serious offences. When a man refused to obey an order you did not immediately get him punished; you first appealed to him in the name of comradeship. Cynical people with no experience of handling men will say instantly that this would never ‘work,’ but as a matter of fact it does ‘work’ in the long run. The discipline of even the worst drafts of militia visibly improved as time went on... ‘Revolutionary’ discipline depends on political consciousness — on an understanding of **why** orders must be obeyed; it takes time to diffuse this, but it also takes time to drill a man into an automaton on the barrack-square... And it is a tribute to the strength of ‘revolutionary’ discipline that the militias stayed in the field at all. For until about June 1937 there was nothing to keep them there, except class loyalty... At the beginning the apparent chaos, the general lack of training, the fact that you often had to argue for five minutes before you could get an order obeyed, appalled and infuriated me. I had British Army ideas, and certainly the Spanish militias were very unlike the British Army. But considering the circumstances they were better troops than one had any right to expect.” [**Homage to Catalonia**, p. 26]

This indicates that Caplan’s attempt to raise the bogey-man of “discipline” is somewhat flawed. Strangely enough, in war, discipline is required. It is a question of whether it is imposed by hierarchy and fear (as in capitalist companies) or by co-operation, argument and equality (as in the anarchist militias and collectives).

Caplan then states that “[w]hile many of the rank-and-file resisted, military discipline swiftly became common in the Anarchist militias.” Which, given the context, implies that the decision to militarise was forced upon the anarchist militia by the anarchist leadership. However, the simple fact is that the militias were agreed to militarise, after intensive debate by the militias themselves, in order to get arms and supplies. The capitalist state used its control of supplies to force the militias to accept army organisation. As Agustin Guillamon puts it in regards to the Iron Column “Repudiation of militarization was debated inside the Iron Column as it was in every other confederal column. In the end, the Column’s assembly gave its approval to militarization, since it would otherwise be denied weapons and provisions.” [**The Friends of Durruti Group**, p. 31] These facts are well known and that Caplan ignores them says a lot about his objectivity (later he does note that “[m]ost of the militia columns swiftly fell into line, although it is unclear to what extent this was because they were following the orders of the Anarchist leadership, or enticed by the central government’s money and weapons..” while in fact it is clear that the

decision to militarise was the produce of central government blackmail, **not** “enticement” (which, I must add, is a somewhat unusual way of describing what is obviously blackmail – “you don’t militarise, you don’t get arms” is not an “enticing” offer and again highlights Caplan’s lack of objectivity).

After noting that the anarchist militias resisted the militarization desired by the government, he notes that it “took scarcely two months for the Anarchists to openly advocate conscription – enslaving young men to kill or be killed – so long as the conscripts were forced to risk their lives for the cause of the CNT.”

Or to translate into English, to risk their lives fighting fascism. In this connection it’s interesting to note that David Friedman (a noted “anarcho” capitalist guru) has presented arguments in favour of conscription in the light of greater dangers to freedom. Thus the CNT cannot be claimed to hold a monopoly of “anarchist” support on conscription. Given the very likely possibility of a fascist victory, many anarchists supported the “lesser” evil of conscription. Caplan, being safe behind a desk, can bemoan “enslaving young men” to fight fascism. Obviously if fascism won, then the greater evil offers less problems – after all, fascism and capitalism can and do exist happily together.

Now, as far as “the Anarchists” advocating conscription it is worthwhile noting that “[d]uring those first months of the war enlistment was voluntary only. The government made continual mobilizations by decree, but there were on the whole ineffective.” [Periats, **Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution**, p. 265] and indeed, even by early 1937 the Catalan government was not enforcing the draft (those who were subject to call-up were asked to go to join union based units and there is little indication that this was based upon force – see Bolleton for details). So, when the CNT was largely control of Catalonia, there was no conscription and the militias were voluntary for over 6 months. Only when the balance of power had started to move towards the newly strengthening state was conscription enforced. And, to place some important context to this issue, let us not forget that in those areas under Franco thousands, probably tens of thousands, of people were being murdered (according to the historian Gabriel Jackson, the fascists murdered 200,000 people **during** the civil war, 200,000 afterwards – **The Spanish Republic and the Civil War: 1931–1939**, p. 539). It is only in this context, the desire to end a civil war and stop fascist totalitarians murdering tens of thousands more, can “the Anarchists” support for conscription be understood. It is significant that Caplan does not provide this context – obviously the systematic murder of hundreds of thousands of people is a lesser evil than conscription.

In discussing the Iron Column, Caplan states that “[I]est one praise their idealism too highly, it should be noted that the Iron Column apparently saw no contradiction between Anarchism and terrorism and robbery.” Obviously he thinks that the militia should have quietly starved to death at the front and not acted to confiscate food, money and so forth. So, while the charge of “robbery” holds, “terrorism” (given its usual meaning) can hardly be applicable in this case.

When the militias were militarised, the CNT tried to ensure that the CNT workers stayed together in their own units. This would be very useful to ensure that the communists did not totally control the army. However, Caplan states that “most of the Iron Column joined units which, while nominally part of the army of the central government, were actually part of the private fiefdom of the CNT.” In other words, damned if you do, damned if you don’t. Above Caplan bemoans the fact the CNT collaborated with the communists. However, now, when the CNT tries to undermine communist power in the army, they are creating their own “private fiefdom.” (as the Catalan regional committee correctly pointed out, “it would be very childish

to hand over our forces to the absolute control of the government” – but apparently that’s what Caplan prefers. And I may note that under CNT “control” the militias would have remained far more democratic/libertarian than under state control. A point not lost on the government).

The CNT just cannot win. As for the decree on conscription, the CNT was a minority in the government, and even if it did oppose conscription could not have stopped it.

Caplan then goes on to say that “the CNT made no attempt to subsist merely on voluntary donations of time and resources. It readily accepted government hand-outs.”

Actually, according to Fraser, “thousands of workers contributed their wage increases to the support of the militias at the front” [p. 232] But as Fraser points out, many workers saw their wages being eaten by inflation and rising prices. Many were not in the position to donate. In addition, rural collectives did provide troops with voluntary donations of time and resources, as did industrial ones. And as far as government “hand-outs” go, obviously the anarchists at the front should have **not** accepted funds or weapons from the state in the name of theoretical purity. But hungry and weaponless men would find it hard to fight fascism.

Caplan finishes by stating “as the next section reveals, when the Anarchists realized that food and valuable agricultural commodities could be extorted out of forced collectives of terrorized peasants, they saw an opportunity that was simply too good to refuse.” The truth of this is discussed below.

E. The Rural Collectives

In this section Caplan “review[s] the history of the Anarchists and rural collectivization” using Burnett Bolloten’s **The Spanish Civil War** as the base.

He states that “After the attempted military coup in July 1936, there was a revolution in many rural areas somewhat similar to that in urban areas. It should be noted, however, that the power of the CNT was centered in the cities rather than the countryside, so it would be extremely surprising if the rural revolution were as ‘spontaneous’ as the urban revolution.” He quotes Fraser as follows:

“Very rapidly collectives, in which not only the means of production but also of consumption were socialized, began to spring up. It did not happen on instructions from the CNT leadership – no more than had the collectives in Barcelona. Here, as there, the initiative came from CNT militants; here, as there, the ‘climate’ for social revolution in the rearguard was created by CNT armed strength: the anarcho-syndicalists’ domination of the streets of Barcelona was re-enacted in Aragon as the CNT militia columns, manned mainly by Catalan anarcho-syndicalist workers, poured in. Where a nucleus of anarcho-syndicalists existed in a village, it seized the moment to carry out the long-awaited revolution and collectivized spontaneously. Where there was none, villagers could find themselves under considerable pressure from the militias to collectivize...”

Caplan then states “Note well Fraser’s point that the anarchists in rural Aragon relied heavily on urban Catalonian anarchists to get off the ground. However over-stated the Anarchists’ claim to represent ‘the people,’ was in Barcelona, in rural Aragon such a claim was absurd.”

But Fraser does mention the “nucleus of anarchosyndicalists” that existing in many villages, meaning that the CNT did have a presence in Aragon. Fraser states that in “some [of the Aragonese villages] there was a flourishing CNT, in others the UGT was strongest, and in only too many there was no unionisation at all.” [**Blood of Spain**, p. 348] Elsewhere, Fraser points out that the Aragon rural collectivisation was “carried out under the general cover, if not necessarily the direct agency, of CNT militia columns.” [p. 370] So, what does this mean in practice?

Before the revolution, the Spanish countryside was marked by high concentrations of land owned by a handful of people (67% of the land was owned by 2% of the population). Life in this capitalist rural economy was dominated by powerful *caciques* [local bosses]. Hence, when the balance of class forces changed in Aragon (i.e. when the *caciques* would not get state aid to protect their property,) many landless workers took over the land. In other words, the presence of the militia ensured that land could be taken over by destroying the capitalist “monopoly of force” that existed before the revolution.

Therefore, by removing the capitalist “monopoly of force,” the CNT militia allowed the possibility of experimentation by the Aragonese population. Caplan suggests that to claim that the CNT had strong support in Aragon is “absurd.” However, the evidence suggests that it is Caplan’s claims that are absurd. Murray Bookchin summarises the situation well:

“The authentic peasant base of the CNT [by the 1930s] now lay in Aragon ...[CNT growth in Zaragoza] provided a springboard for a highly effective libertarian agitation in lower Aragon, particularly among the impoverished laborers and debt-ridden peasantry of the dry steppes region.” [**The Spanish Anarchists**, p. 220]

Graham Kelsey, in his social history of the C.N.T. in Aragon between 1930 and 1937, provides the necessary evidence to more than back Bookchin’s claim of C.N.T. growth. Kelsey points out that as well as the “spread of libertarian groups and the increasing consciousness among C.N.T. members of libertarian theories ...contribu[ting] to the growth of the anarchosyndicalist movement in Aragon” the existence of “agrarian unrest” also played an important role in that growth [**Anarchosyndicalism, Libertarian Communism and the State**, pp.80–81]. This all lead to the “revitalisation of the C.N.T. network in Aragon” [p. 82] and so by 1936, the C.N.T. had built upon the “foundations laid in 1933... [and] had finally succeeded in translating the very great strength of the urban trade-union organisation in Zaragoza into a regional network of considerable extent.” [Op. Cit., p. 134]

Kelsey and other historians note the long history of anarchism in Aragon, dating back to the late 1860s. However, before the 1910s there had been little gains in rural Aragon by the C.N.T. due to the power of local bosses (called **caciques**):

“Local landowners and small industrialists, the **caciques** of provincial Aragon, made every effort to enforce the closure of these first rural anarchosyndicalist cells [created after 1915]. By the time of the first rural congress of the Aragonese CNT confederation in the summer of 1923, much of the progress achieved through the organization’s considerable propaganda efforts had been countered by repression elsewhere.” [Graham Kelsey, “Anarchism in Aragon,” p. 62]

A C.N.T. activist indicates the power of these bosses and how difficult it was to be a union member in Aragon:

“Repression is not the same in the large cities as it is in the villages where everyone knows everybody else and where the Civil Guards are immediately notified of a comrade’s slightest movement. Neither friends nor relatives are spared. All those who do not serve the state’s repressive forces unconditionally are pursued, persecuted and on occasions beaten up.” [cited by Kelsey, *Op. Cit.*, p. 74]

However, while there were some successes in organising rural unions, even in 1931 “propaganda campaigns which led to the establishment of scores of village trade-union cells, were followed by a counter-offensive from village **caciques** which forced them to close.” [Ibid. p. 67] But even in the face of this repression the C.N.T. grew and “from the end of 1932... [there was] a successful expansion of the anarchosyndicalist movement into several parts of the region where previously it had never penetrated.” [Kesley, **Anarchosyndicalism, Libertarian Communism and the State**, p. 185]

This growth was built upon in 1936, with increased rural activism which had slowly eroded the power of the **caciques** (which in part explains their support for the fascist coup). After the election of the Popular Front, years of anarchist propaganda and organisation paid off with a massive increase in rural membership in the C.N.T.:

“The dramatic growth in rural anarcho-syndicalist support in the six weeks since the general election was emphasized in the [Aragon CNT’s April] congress’s agenda... the congress directed its attention to rural problems ... [and agreed a programme which was] exactly what was to happen four months later in liberated Aragon.” [Kesley, “Anarchism in Aragon”, p. 76]

In the aftermath of a regional congress, held in Zaragoza at the start of April, a series of intensive propaganda campaigns was organised through each of the provinces of the regional confederation. Many meetings were held in villages which had never before heard anarcho-syndicalist propaganda. This was very successful and by the beginning of June, 1936, the number of Aragon unions had topped 400, compared to only 278 one month earlier (an increase of over 40% in 4 weeks). [Ibid., pp. 75–76]

This increase in union membership reflects increased social struggle by the Aragonese working population and their attempts to improve their standard of living, which was very low for most of the population. A journalist from the conservative-Catholic **Heraldo de Aragon** visited lower Aragon in the summer of 1935 and noted “[t]he hunger in many homes, where the men are not working, is beginning to encourage the youth to subscribe to misleading teachings.” [cited by Kesley, *Ibid.*, p. 74]

Little wonder, then, the growth in CNT membership and social struggle Kesley indicates:

“Evidence of a different kind was also available that militant trade unionism in Aragon was on the increase. In the five months between mid-February and mid-July 1936 the province of Zaragoza experienced over seventy strikes, more than had previously been recorded in any entire year, and things were clearly no different in the other two provinces ... the great majority of these strikes were occurring in provincial towns and villages. Strikes racked the provinces and in at least three instances were actually transformed into general strikes.” [Ibid., p. 76]

Therefore, in the spring and summer of 1936, we see a massive growth in C.N.T. membership which reflects growing militant struggle by the urban and rural population of Aragon. Years of C.N.T. propaganda and organising had ensured this growth in C.N.T. influence, a growth which is also reflected in the creation of collectives in liberated Aragon during the revolution. Therefore, the construction of a collectivised society was founded directly upon the emergence, during the five years of the Second Republic, of a mass trade-union movement infused by libertarian, anarchist principles. These collectives were constructed in accordance with the programme agreed at the Aragon C.N.T. conference of April 1936 which reflected the wishes of the rural membership of the unions within Aragon (and due to the rapid growth of the C.N.T. afterwards obviously reflected popular feelings in the area).

In the words of Graham Kesley, “libertarian dominance in post-insurrection Aragon itself reflected the predominance that anarchists had secured before the war; by the summer of 1936 the CNT had succeeded in establishing throughout Aragon a mass trade-union movement of strictly libertarian orientation, upon which widespread and well-supported network the extensive collective experiment was to be founded.” [Ibid., p. 61]

Additional evidence that supports a high level of C.N.T. support in rural Aragon can be provided by the fact that it was Aragon that was the centre of the December 1933 insurrection organised by the C.N.T. As Bookchin notes, “only Aragon rose on any significant scale, particularly Saragossa ...many of the villages declared libertarian communism and perhaps the heaviest fighting took place between the vineyard workers in Rioja and the authorities” [M. Bookchin, Op. Cit., p. 256]

It is unlikely for the C.N.T. to organise an insurrection in an area within which it had little support or influence. According to Kesley’s in-depth social history of Aragon, “it was precisely those areas which had most important in December 1933 ... which were now [in 1936], in seeking to create a new pattern of economic and social organisation, to form the basis of libertarian Aragon” [G. Kesley, **Anarchosyndicalism, Libertarian Communism and the State**, p. 161] After the revolt, thousands of workers were jailed, with the authorities having to re-open closed prisons and turn at least one disused monastery into a jail due to the numbers arrested.

Therefore, it can be seen that the majority of collectives in Aragon were the product of C.N.T. (and UGT) influenced workers taking the opportunity to create a new form of social life, a form marked by its voluntary and directly democratic nature. For from being unknown in rural Aragon, the C.N.T. was well established and growing at a fast rate – “Spreading out from its urban base... the CNT, first in 1933 and then more extensively in 1936, succeeded in converting an essentially urban organisation into a truly regional confederation.” [Ibid., p. 184]

Additional evidence that refutes Caplan’s claim of little CNT support in rural Aragon can be provided by the fact that it was Aragon that was the centre of the December 1933 insurrection organised by the CNT. As Bookchin notes, “only Aragon rose on any significant scale, particularly Saragossa ...many of the villages declared libertarian communism and perhaps the heaviest fighting took place between the vineyard workers in Rioja and the authorities” [M Bookchin, Op. Cit., p. 256]

It is unlikely for the CNT to organise an insurrection in an area within which it had little support or influence. According to Kesley’s in-depth social history of Aragon, “it was precisely those areas which had most important in December 1933 ... which were now, in seeking to create a new pattern of economic and social organisation, to form the basis of libertarian Aragon” [G. Kesley, Op. Cit., p. 161]

Therefore, Caplan's claim (a claim, I should note, unsupported by any direct evidence) that the CNT militia imposed collectivisation in Aragon by force is false. The historian he quotes does not state this and the pre-war history of Aragon suggests that CNT support was far stronger than Caplan cares to admit. This suggests that Kesley's summary is truer than Caplan's:

“Libertarian communism and agrarian collectivisation were not economic terms or social principles enforced upon a hostile population by special teams of urban anarchosyndicalists ...” [G. Kesley, *Op. Cit.*, p. 161]

And I should add that Gabriel Jackson notes that “[i]n large portions of... Aragon practically no revolutionary violence occurred.” [**The Spanish Republic and the Civil War: 1931–1939**, p. 532] This, combined with Kesley's important work in demonstrating the massive and rapid growth of the Aragon CNT before the war, places Caplan's claims in a new light.

Caplan then quotes Bollothen on how the collectives were formed and then states that “It barely took a month for Anarchists to set themselves up as the government of those parts of Aragon until their control, euphemistically dubbing themselves the ‘Regional Defense Council of Aragon.’”

This council was set up in a conference which contained delegates from those collectives which had been created as well as the militia columns. It should be noted that most the militia columns opposed the setting up of the defence council. Caplan considers that this council showed “the actions of the government of Aragon reveal the proclivities of undivided Anarchist rule.”

And what were the actions of this council? To encourage the formation of collectives and ensure that the front line was supplied with food. The council also kept records of surplus' delivered to it and used them to buy the collectives machinery (for example, “The collective procured a Czech machine powered by an electric motor...[i]t was ‘paid for’ by the collective's produce... with which it had run up a credit with the Council of Aragon” [Fraser, p. 356]). In other words, the collectives and the council allowed the pooling of resources which enabled new investments that otherwise the Aragon population would **never** have seen.

Next he notes that “Many people fled for fear of their lives. Their land was seized almost immediately. After all, who but a ‘fascist’ would flee? The expropriation of land from anyone too terrified of the new regime to even wait to see what their new life would be like provided the nucleus for the collectives.”

In other words, those who could afford to flee did so. And as they had fled, their land should have been left untouched? No, strangely enough, landless farm workers and tenant farmers took it over. Given the role of cacique's in rural life, it's hardly surprising that many left. Treating day-workers as “animals” becomes dangerous when these people are no longer held down by the state. And, I must add, it seems strange that Caplan does not acknowledge the nature of oppression within the Aragon countryside when making the above statement. Yes, many people did flee for their lives, because they had either supported the uprising (and so favoured totalitarianism) or knew that their lives would be in danger for their pre-war oppression of the rural population.

Caplan goes on to say:

“Farmers who fled for their lives were obviously not voluntary participants in the Anarchists' collectivization experiment. What about the remainder? One of the persistent claims of defenders of the Anarchists' collectives was that the farmers were usually ‘free to choose’: they could either join the collective, or continue to farm individually so long as they hired no wage labor.”

Obviously those who fled for their lives were not participants (voluntary or forced) of the collectivisations – **they were not there to take part!** Perhaps Caplan is applying the usual neo-classical technique of confusing the owners of capital with the capital itself? As for those who were left, this was a population of day-workers, poor peasants with barely enough land to feed themselves, and various small and medium peasants. Unsurprisingly, the day-workers and the poor (who had flocked to join the CNT before the war) also flocked to join the collectives.

Therefore, Caplan fails to discuss the differences in the rural population and so paints a picture of rural Aragon which is misleading to say the least. Perhaps he thinks that only those who own land are worthy of mention when evaluating the Aragon collectives? If so, his argument fails to base itself on the reality of Aragon life and so is flawed.

He concludes that “The overwhelming majority of the evidence reveals that the collectives’ defenders are simply wrong” on the issue of peasants being “free to choose”, quoting Bollothen as saying:

“Although CNT-FAI publications cited numerous cases of peasant proprietors and tenant farmers who had adhered voluntarily to the collective system, there can be no doubt that an incomparable larger number doggedly opposed it or accepted it only under extreme duress.”

However, Caplan ignores an important point about rural Spain. Not everyone was a peasant or tenant farmer. As Bollothen points out:

“If the individual farmer viewed with dismay the swift and widespread collectivisation of agriculture, the farm workers of the Anarchosyndicalist CNT and the Socialist UGT saw it as the commencement of a new era.” [**The Spanish Civil War**, p. 63]

In other words, Caplan only considers one side of the picture and does not mention the other. How objective – obviously day labourers (the ones “treated like animals”) and other farm workers and poor peasants do not matter here. This means that there is no such “overwhelming” body of evidence and what evidence that does exist suggests a conclusion radically different from Caplan’s.

He then argues that “Bollothen goes on to explain that it was the presence of the Anarchist militia which made collectivization possible. The Anarchist militants, convinced of their superior wisdom, arrived carrying a plan for a new way of life for the farmers:

“‘We militiamen must awaken in these persons the spirit that has been numbed by political tyranny,’ said an article in a CNT newspaper, referring to the villagers of Farlete. ‘We must direct them along the path of the true life, and for that it is not sufficient to make an appearance in the village; we must proceed with the ideological conversion of these simple folk.’”

The arrogance and paternalism of these remarks is clear; is there no possibility that the farmers might be right and the Anarchists might be wrong?”

How dare the anarchists try to convince people of their ideas! Of course, many people (not just anarchists) are convinced of the truth of their ideas and express them in such arrogant ways. We have come across many “anarcho”-capitalists who do so as well. However, the question arises how did this “conversion” take place. Here is an example of such “arrogance and paternalism” in action:

“There were, of course, those who didn’t want to share and who said that each collective should take care of itself. But they were usually convinced in the assemblies. We would try to speak to them in terms they understood. We’d ask, “Did you think it was fair when the cacique [local boss] let people starve if there wasn’t enough work?” and they said, “Of course not”. They would eventually come around. Don’t forget, there were three hundred thousand collectivists [in Aragon], but only ten thousand of us had been members of the C.N.T.. We had a lot of educating to do”. [Felix Carrasquer, quoted in **Free Women of Spain**, p. 79]

In other words, by discussion and debate within democratic assemblies. Hardly “arrogance” or “paternalism” and far more in fitting with true libertarian ideas – that people are convinced of new ideas by debate and by positive examples.

Caplan then quotes Bolloten as follows:

“The fact is that many small holders and tenant farmers were forced to join the collective farms before they had an opportunity to decide freely. Although the libertarian movement tended to minimize the factor of coercion in the development of collectivized agriculture or even to deny it altogether, it was, on occasions, frankly admitted. ‘During the first few weeks of the Revolution,’ wrote Higinio Noja Ruiz, a prominent member of the CNT, ‘the partisans of collectivization acted according to their own revolutionary opinions. They respected neither property nor persons. In some villages collectivization was only possible by imposing it on the minority.’”

In **some** villages, collectivisation may have only been possible by taking the land of a minority of big land owners. That is true, as is the claim that many people were forced to join (against CNT policy, it should be noted) by local CNT members. But, it should be noted, according to testimony in **Blood of Spain**, only around 20 collectives in Aragon were “total” ones (out of 450). Hence the “some” villages were not as widespread as Caplan suggests.

Caplan continues:

“Fraser amply confirms Bolloten’s allegations. ‘There was no need to dragoon them at pistol point: the coercive climate, in which ‘fascists’ were being shot, was sufficient. ‘Spontaneous’ and ‘forced’ collectives existed, as did willing and unwilling collectivists within them.’”

Of course a civil war would produce a “coercive climate,” particularly at the front line and so the CNT can hardly be blamed for that (although Caplan does try). As far as “forced” collectives go, the figures given by Fraser states that only around 20 were “total” (i.e. forced) collectives (out of 450) and 30% of the population felt safe enough **not** to join. In other words, in the vast majority of collectives those joining could see that those who did not were safe. These figures should not be discounted, as they give an indication of the movement and why it found people to support it in the face of both communist and capitalist attacks.

Caplan again:

“Fraser goes on to explain that rural collectivization was very different from urban collectivization; while the latter was indeed typically carried out by the workers, the former was not:

‘The collectivization, carried out under the general cover, if not necessarily the direct agency, of CNT militia columns, represented a revolutionary minority’s attempt to control not only production but consumption for egalitarian purposes and the needs of the war. In this, agrarian collectives differed radically from the industrial collectives which regulated production only.’”

So who **did** carry out the rural collectivisation? Fraser states that it was **not** the CNT militia columns. So the original initiative must have come from the CNT membership in Aragon. How did they do it? It is clear that they took the opportunity that the destruction of the state by the CNT militia created to suggest the creation of collectives. In many villages, the CNT militants who lived and worked there took the opportunity to set up what they had “always talked about,” namely voluntary collectives [Fraser, p. 352]. Even in villages without a pre-war CNT presence, the voluntary nature of the experiment was stressed – “no one was to be mistreated” by villagers (in the words of CNT representatives who visited one village [Fraser, p. 360]) and the decision to join the collective or not was left entirely in the names of the villagers.

Therefore, to state as Caplan goes that rural collectives were “typically” carried out by the CNT militia is simply false. The evidence suggests otherwise. It is of course clear that given the number of anarchist troops, many people joined the collectives “just to be safe,” but 30% of the Aragon population felt safe enough to **not** to join. In addition, we have indicated that the rural labourers supported the collectives, as did many poor farmers, as well as the growth of influence in the CNT before the war, so indicating that collectivisation may not have been as unpopular as Caplan is arguing.

In addition, it should be noted that in the examples Fraser gives the CNT made no attempt to determine **how** the collectives would work. The decisions on how the collectives were to be organised and who would join was left in the hands of the villagers themselves. This indicates that the villagers themselves **was** carried out by those involved.

Of course, given Caplan’s claim that the rural collectives were created by the CNT militia we would expect the militia column leaders to have initiated the process. However, nothing could be further from the truth. As Fraser notes, the advice by one militia leader not to collectivise “was not heeded” [p. 349] and “the CNT column leaders ... opposed” the creation of the Council of Aragon [p. 350]. Hardly suggesting a militia organised collectivisation process, now is it?

Caplan then claims that “Bolton makes a few statements about the voluntary character of the Anarchist collectives which can be taken out of context to make it appear that Bolton accepts the apologists’ view that rural collectivization was ‘voluntary.’”:

“While rural collectivization in Aragon embraced more than 70 percent of the population in the area under left-wing control, and many of the 450 collectives of the region were largely voluntary, it must be emphasized that this singular development was in some measure due to the presence of militiamen from the neighboring region of Catalonia, the immense majority of whom were members of the CNT and FAI.”

In other words, Caplan is suggesting that if we point out these figures then we are “apologists” of “anarcho-statism.” However, these figures are interesting, for if the collectives **were** created by anarchist terror, why did only 70% join and not 100%? Caplan does not even raise the question.

Little wonder, for if the collectives had been created by anarchist terror or force, we would expect a figure of 100% membership in the collectives. This was not the case, indicating the

basically voluntary nature of the experiment. In addition, if the C.N.T. militia **had** forced peasants into collectives we would expect the membership of the collectives to peak almost overnight, not grow slowly over time. However, this is what happened:

“At the regional congress of collectives, held at Caspe in mid-February 1937, nearly 80,000 collectivists were represented from ‘almost all the villages of the region.’ This, however, was but a beginning. By the end of April the number of collectivists had risen to 140 000; by the end of the first week of May to 180,000; and by the end of June to 300,000.” [Graham Kelsey, “Anarchism in Aragon,” pp. 60–82, **Spain in Conflict 1931–1939**, Martin Blinkhorn (ed), p. 61]

If the collectives has been created by force, then their membership would have been 300,000 in February, 1937, not increasing steadily to reach that number four months later. Neither can it be claimed that the increase was due to new villages being collectivised, as almost all villages had sent delegates in February. This indicates that many peasants joined the collectives because of the advantages associated with common labour, the increased resources it placed at their hands and the fact that the surplus wealth which had in the previous system been monopolised by the few was used instead to raise the standard of living of the entire community.

So, around 30% of the Aragon population felt safe enough **not** to join and membership within collectives increased slowly over time. In other words, in the vast majority of collectives those joining could see that those who did not were safe. In addition, the steady growth in the membership of the collectives indicates that they were not imposed by the C.N.T. militia, for if they had been imposed then we would expect a 100% membership overnight. Instead we see a steady growth over a period of months, hardly evidence which can support Caplan’s claims. These figures should not be discounted, as they give an indication of the basically popular, spontaneous and voluntary nature of the movement.

Another of Bolloten’s statements is as follows:

“But in spite of the cleavages between doctrine and practice that plagued the Spanish Anarchists whenever they collided with the realities of power, it cannot be overemphasized that notwithstanding the many instances of coercion and violence, the revolution of July 1936 distinguished itself from all others by the generally spontaneous and far-reaching character of its collectivist movement and by its promise of moral and spiritual renewal. Nothing like this spontaneous movement had ever occurred before” [Op. Cit., p. 78]

Bolloten also quotes a report on the district of Valderrobes:

“Collectivisation was nevertheless opposed by opponents on the right and adversaries on the left. If the eternally idle who have been expropriated had been asked what they thought of collectivisation, some would have replied that it was robbery and others a dictatorship. But, for the elderly, the day workers, the tenant farmers and small proprietors who had always been under the thumb of the big landowners and heartless usurers, it appeared as salvation” [Op. Cit., p. 71]

Notice the “generally spontaneous” character. Imposed collectives are **not** spontaneous. This indicates that Bolloten’s “few statements” are in fact more significant than Caplan likes to suggest. As for the report Bolloten quotes, this reflects the diverse nature of the rural population

and indicates that Caplan's picture of it is distinctly false. As these groups who supported the collectives were the ones treated "like animals" before the revolution, it is hardly surprising that Caplan ignores them. They obviously do not count in his eyes (as indicated by his statements above).

Caplan argues that "it is important to realize that Bollothen rightly regards the 'voluntary' collectives as nearly as coercive as the 'forced' collectives:"

"However, although neither the UGT nor the CNT permitted the small Republican farmer to hold more land than he could cultivate without the aid of hired labor, and in many instances he was unable to dispose freely of his surplus crops because he was compelled to deliver them to the local committee on the latter's terms, he was often driven under various forms of pressure, as will be shown latter in this chapter, to attach himself to the collective system. This was true particularly in villages where the Anarchosyndicalists were in the ascendant."

Caplan states that "while the illegality of hiring wage labor seemed perfectly fair to the Anarchist militants, this fact plainly demonstrates that the mere existence of collectives hardly ensures that no one will voluntarily contract to work for a capitalist."

However, as Bollothen notes, "the collective system of agriculture threaten to drain the rural labour market of wage workers" [p. 62], which it did seem to do (as Bollothen notes, the wage labourers viewed the collectives in a vastly different light than the wealthier farmers). And as the evidence Caplan presents of is of "brothers and neighbours" helping individualists this hardly counts as wage labour (i.e. **non** economic reasons would have been the determining reason for aiding them).

Caplan states that "Fraser provides evidence that the prohibition against hiring wage labor was often even stricter than it seems... Plainly it is possible to preserve a nominal right to be an 'individualist,' while in practice imposing so many unreasonable restrictions on them that the independent farmers break down and join the collective."

Is this any more unreasonable than denying free access to land by wealthy land owners before the revolution? Is it the case that the wealthy should determine the rules and not the majority? And is "free riding" during a bitter civil war a "reasonable" activity? Could not the "restrictions" Caplan bemoans can be the result of the war? As for **some** of the restrictions Bollothen and others note is that "individualists" could not get the benefits of the collectives. The is hardly "unreasonable." Of course Caplan ignores the example of collectives helping individualists with machinery and so on which Level and others have documented. Therefore, the "restrictions" placed upon independent farmers was the result of the fact they would not be expected to have a "free-ride" while others paid for the public good of resisting fascism. I'm surprised to hear a neo-classical economist support "free-riding" to such a degree that Caplan does in this essay.

Caplan then lists the "various forms of pressure" to which Bollothen alludes and concludes as follows:

"It is especially strange that anarcho-socialists, who frequently claim that superficially voluntary interaction (such as the capitalist-worker relationship) is really coercive, so credulously accept the voluntarist credentials of the Anarchist-run rural collectives. At least the worker can try to find another employer; but how 'voluntary'

was the decision of a farmer to join the collective when he had to sell his crops to a legally protected Anarchist monopsony anyway? If the middlemen and speculators had not been banned by the Anarchists, an independent farmer could always have sold to them if the Anarchists' price was too low."

However, as has been mentioned in passing, there was a war on. Many collectivists obviously considered it a lesser evil to control prices than allow increased prices which would have resulted in food being unavailable to those fighting fascism (for example). Many avowed capitalist countries have introduced rationing and price controls in war time so such activity is hardly unexpected in a war. That Caplan ignores the existence of the war when attacking the collectives is hardly surprising given his motive for this essay. And I should add, his expression "the Anarchists' price" is misleading as the evidence indicates that the collectives were democratically run and so prices would have been agreed at collective meetings, and **not** by "the Anarchists."

As the war effort could be considered a "public good," it is hardly surprising that the collectives tried to ensure that prices were controlled to stop inflation and ensure it got to the troops fighting the war. But, of course, as "anarcho" capitalism has **never** existed nor faced fascism in a civil war, it's easy for Caplan to point out that the collectives were not perfect.

Moving on, Caplan quotes Graham Kelsey ("an historian with unbridled sympathy for the Anarchist movement") as "reluctantly" revealing "an important prod used to push the hapless peasantry into the collectives."

"The military insurrection had come at a critical moment in the agricultural calendar. Throughout lower Aragon there were fields of grain ready for harvesting... At the assembly in Albalate de Cinca the opening clause of the agreed programme had required everyone in the district, independent farmers and collectivists alike, to contribute equally to the war effort, thereby emphasizing one of the most important considerations in the period immediately following the rebellion."

Caplan concludes: "The independent farmer, in short, had no option to remain aloof from the Anarchists' cause and do his own thing; even if he could keep his land, a large part of his product belonged to the CNT"

Or to the war effort, as Kelsey puts it. Again, we are faced with the fact that the CNT were fighting a war against fascism and many considered that this war situation meant that everyone should be involved. If the fascists won, then everyone would be subjected to their rule. Could winning the war be considered a "public good"? Many anarchists (and non-anarchists) thought so. It is even admitted by certain "anarcho" capitalists that national defence would be a problem in their vision of a new "society" (see David Friedman, **The Machinery of Freedom**, for example). Therefore, given the problem facing them, the Aragon collectives solved it by the only means in their power – by making all contribute equally to the war effort.

Caplan then notes that "[t]he fact that only a small percentage of the Anarchist collectives were called 'total,' cannot alter the fact that aside from the intense monopolistic pressure wielded by the CNT through its stranglehold over the economy and agricultural markets, an independent farmer still had to 'contribute equally to the war effort.'"

This is because those independent farmers would benefit if fascism was defeated. In other words, we face the "free rider" problem, and a war situation may not be the best time to come up

with new solutions to the problem. But, of course, the war is irrelevant for Caplan. This can be seen when he calls the war effort against fascism “the CNT” or “the CNT’s cause.”

Caplan then quotes the testimony of Fernando Aragon and his wife Francisca on the totalitarian nature of their collective. However, he fails to mention either of the following:

Firstly, Fraser himself points out, that, for “extraneous reasons,” he could not “talk to supporters and detractors of the collectives... in the Angues collective... The testimony of Fernando ARAGON and his wife — a view of the inherent undemocratic dangers contained within the collectivisation experiment — must stand on its own” [p. 369]

Secondly, the democratic nature of the other three collectives Fraser discusses:

According to one member of the Beceite collectives, “it was marvellous... to live in a collective, a free society where one could say what one thought, where if the village committee seemed unsatisfactory one could say. The committee took no big decisions without calling the whole village together in a general assembly. All this was wonderful” [p. 288]

Or how about another Aragon collective, in which “Once the work groups were established on a friendly basis and worked their own lands, everyone got on well enough, he recalled. There was no need for coercion, no need for discipline and punishment.... A collective wasn’t a bad idea at all” [p. 360]. This collective, like 95% of the 450 collectives, was voluntary, “I couldn’t oblige him to join; we weren’t living under a dictatorship” [p. 362]

Fraser states that “For detractors of Aragon collectives, Fernando’s experience was more or less typical: For supporters exceptional, but undeniable.” And as can be seen from both Fraser and Bolloten, it was “exceptional” and **not** “typical.” It is funny how Caplan concentrates on Aragon’s account and not on the other collectives described by Fraser. The question of why Caplan feels happy to quote the uncollaborated testimony of 2 people out of 300 000 in preference to overwhelming other evidence available is easily answered – it helps create the picture of “anarcho-statism” that Caplan is trying to create. That he builds his case on such evidence indicates its (lack of) strength.

Caplan then states “[i]n a footnote, Fraser insightfully explains that once the CNT engineered the abolition of money (no one even tries to explain how the abolition of money could be voluntary), the peasants were helpless. A poor person with a little money has options; the Aragonese peasantry did not.”

“The problem of the collectivists’ freedom to leave villages – permanently or on trips – exercised the imagination of observers from the start. With the abolition of money, the collective held the upper hand since anyone wishing to travel had to get ‘republican’ money from the committee. This meant justifying the trip.”

However, the collectives individually decided on the question of the abolition of money (as can be seen different collectives tried different techniques at different times), **not** the CNT. In addition, the committees were elected from and accountable to mass assemblies. In other words, an individual in a collective did had options – to join the collective, to convince his fellow members to provide him or her resources to make a trip he or she needed to make. Under capitalism, many peasants did not have the resources to make long trips, within a collective they did so. And, I should note, the options of the poor Aragonese **before** the war seemed to consist of work for one of the local bosses on the poverty level (as indicated pre-war Aragon saw mounting poverty,

and social unrest), subject to their rule in the village (the power of the local bosses ensured that workers had a hard time if they joined a union) or leave for another region of Spain (like Catalonia, with its strong union movement). Needless to say, Caplan does not indicate what the “options” available to a “poor person with a little money” under the capitalist regime that existed before the revolution actually considered of — after all, work for poverty-level wages, be treated like “animals” or move somewhere else is hardly a great example of free freedom to choose. So, as far as options available to poor peasants in pre-war Aragon goes, its clear that the collectives went beyond them.

It should also be noted that Caplan “insightfully” ignores the testimony in Fraser and Bolton of people easily getting “permission” to travel and that Fraser concludes by saying “Conditions obviously varied from collective to collective and, as in many other aspects, generalisation is impossible” [p. 368]

Nevertheless, Caplan feels able to generalise and ignore the evidence of people travelling from collectives.

Caplan then discusses the “despotism of the Anarchists” and ends by saying “[t]hus, the freedom of the Aragonese peasantry was the Orwellian freedom to live precisely as the Anarchist militia deemed right.” However, the quotes he presented makes it clear that the decisions were made by the collectives in question and not by the militia. This can be seen from the references to “the inhabitants,” “one peasant” and “the collectivists” and no mention of the militia. This suggests that these examples of “anarchist despotism” were the democratic decision of the collectives involved. Of course, anarchists would not take democracy that far, but the collectives were **not** run by anarchists but by those in them.

Caplan then goes on to compare the anarchist collectives with the “forced agricultural collectivization, in both Communist and other Third World countries.” He states that the “ugly secret of the Anarchists is that the underlying objective of forced collectivization was to fund their military and cement the power of their councils and committees.”

However, as noted Caplan has not presented a case that forced collectivisation occurred. Only 5% of collectives were “total” (i.e. forced) and the collectives themselves based on mass assemblies and elected committees. As for the pressures which individualists were subject to, these clearly resulted from the need to win the war. In addition, “the ugly secret of the Anarchists” was well known at the time. The newspapers reported that the collectives were feeding the front free of charge. In addition, (as Caplan himself notes later) the underlying objective for the collectives was **not** to feed the front but to create a new society based on co-operative labour and in this they were successful. The vast majority of the collectives were voluntary and based on mass assemblies and elected committees.

As many of the Aragonese had relatives at the front and most had a lot to lose by a victory for fascism (i.e. the land they had just taken over), it’s little wonder that the collectives agreed to send their surplus to the front. Caplan claims that the surplus was used just for feeding the troops and for armaments, but this is false. The surplus was also used for investment in the collectives, new machinery, schools and so on. The question should arise, who actually controlled where the surplus went. Caplan is strangely silent on this question, for good reason. The facts state that it was the collectivists themselves who controlled their own surplus. This quote summarises the situation well:

“The policies to be followed by collectives were usually determined in general membership meetings that also decided upon the distribution of profits and agricultural surpluses.” [*The Agony of Modernization*, p. 393]

And, I may note, its interesting to compare the Aragon collectives to those in Stalin’s Russia. After 5 years of brutal “reform” the Russian collectives had 85% membership, but such a high membership was also associated with the deaths of 10–20 million people. In Aragon, 70% membership occurred after 10 months and no mass murder. This indicates well that the Aragon collectives were not the product of “forced collectivisation” but instead an essentially local development, one that built upon and reflected the growth of the CNT just before the war (and years of anarchist propaganda work as well).

In other words, Caplan’s claims of an anarchist “ugly secret” are simply false. Caplan, by ignoring all these established facts, exposes himself as less than objective.

He then quotes Graham Kelsey, who he claims “tries his best to portray this naked exploitation favorably,” as follows:

“To organize the provisioning of the front-line volunteers as rapidly and as equitably as possibly was to be more than merely an aim in itself. One of the most common corollaries of war in a capitalist system is the development of such social and economic evils as black-marketeering, profiteering, and, as a consequence, arbitrarily imposed shortages and serious inflation. The villages from which large numbers of volunteers had joined the columns had immediately organized the despatch of supplies to the front. These villages, however, were but a handful, chiefly those with strong anarchosyndicalist traditions. Evidently the situation had to be regularized, particularly as the initial insurrection had begun to assume all the characteristics of a prolonged military confrontation. Agricultural collectivisation, therefore, became both a way of ensuring the equal contribution of all villages to the burden posed by the conflict and also a way of making it impossible for those who possessed the means or the inclination to profit from the exigencies placed upon the regional economy by the presence of civil war. It was not just a libertarian theory; it was also the only way to ensure the maximum agricultural production with the minimum economic corruption.”

Of course, war as a “public good” does not spring into Caplan’s neo-classical mind. Therefore the anarchists **must** have had a “hidden agenda” in their activities. However, the simple fact is that the war against fascism led to the decisions that the anarchists made. Kelsey does not “portray” “naked exploitation” favourably, he indicates the social context of the decisions that were made – a context that Caplan seeks to deny in favour of a text-book free market system.

Caplan goes on to state that “Kelsey is virtually the only academic historian who attempts to affirm the voluntary character of the Anarchist collectives,” but as noted above, Caplan states that Bollothen’s comments should be ignored. This means that Kelsey is “virtually” the only historian **if** we agree with Caplan and ignore the comments of the others!

He then states that “among his many puzzling statements, one that stands out is his attempt to prove that the collectives had to be voluntary because everyone supporters them, regardless of party.”

“Another sign of the acceptance of agricultural collectivisation was the adherence of the members of other trade-union and political groups all of which, nationally, maintained a hostile stance towards collectivisation.”

Caplan maintains that “[n]ormal people see an unnatural degree of unanimity and infer that such agreement could only be the result of extreme coercion. Kelsey sees an unnatural degree of unanimity and infers that such agreement could only be the result of the extraordinary goodness of the collectives.”

Of course, normal people see that some measures in violation of libertarian principles may occur during a civil war, but not Caplan. However, as noted by Bolloten (but ignored by Caplan), only 70% of the population joined the collectives. Fraser’s evidence indicates that many of the members of other parties and groups did **not** join. In other words, the evidence that those who joined the collectives had to do so is false. In addition, that the collectives increased production, introduced machinery, allowed members to get medical treatment they could never have afforded alone, etc. would also have had an impact on decisions to join. But, of course, these positive aspects of the collectives would weaken his case so they are ignored. And I must add, it seems strange that Caplan claims that there was “an unnatural degree of unanimity” which could only be the “result of extreme coercion” – a coercion which did not produce 100% collectivisation over night but was enough to create “an unnatural degree of unanimity”? Hardly convincing – coercion to the degree Caplan implies here would have resulted in a very high collectivisation rate overnight, but that did not happen. And given that the historian Gabriel Jackson notes that “[i]n large portions of... Aragon practically no revolutionary violence occurred” [**The Spanish Republic and the Civil War: 1931–1939**, p. 532] we can suggest that Caplan’s claims of “extreme coercion” are false. Instead, the obvious success of the collectives in terms of democratic self-management, improved production and consumption, the building of hospitals, roads, and so on, as well as the introduction of labour saving machinery and so on, is the reason that people joined and supported the collectives.

Of course, in today’s world, the vast majority of politicians and “experts” have an “unnatural degree of unanimity” about the free market. Perhaps that suggests “extreme coercion” as well? The idea that the collectives worked, that the majority saw their liberty and living standards increase due to them, and that **this** was the reason for their acceptance by members of other organisations is lost on Caplan. And given that 30% of the population **did not** subscribe to the collectives, this does not suggest “an unnatural degree of unanimity,” quite the reverse! Of course Caplan ignores this sizeable minority in passing his judgement.

It should also be mentioned that Kesley immediately after the quote cited by Caplan highlights the existence of collectives organised by groups other than the CNT. He notes the existence of a CNT-UGT collective, a UGT one and a few organised by the Communists. In other words, collectives not run by the CNT which is at odds with Caplan’s suggestion of a CNT run statist regime.

Now, Caplan is trying to present a case of “extreme coercion,” but does not present any evidence to back up his claims. If there had been the “extreme coercion” Caplan claims, we would have expected 100% collectivisation rate. This did not occur. As additional evidence against Caplan’s claims, we can cite the make up of the new municipal councils created after July 19th. As Kesley notes, “[w]hat is immediately noticeable from the results is that although the region has often been branded as one controlled by anarchists to the total exclusion of all other forces, the

CNT was far from enjoying the degree of absolute domination often implied and inferred.” [p. 198]

These facts cannot be reconciled with Caplan’s claims of “extreme coercion” and so Caplan’s claims are not supported by the evidence.

Caplan then quotes Royo, an anarchist militant, and comments on his statement that “if there had been a free market, the farmers would be paid the value of their labor. There is much irony in Royo’s tacit admission that the ‘problem’ with the free market is that it prevents exploitation, ensuring that everyone gets paid for the product of their labor.” Of course, as Caplan is a supporter of capitalism, he states that the market provides the worker with the “value of their labour.” However, the worker does not in fact receive this, as capitalists control the product of that labour and keep a slice of the value created for themselves (that is why Kropotkin, echoing Proudhon’s analysis, noted that “*the only guarantee not to be robbed of the fruits of your labour is to possess the instruments of labour.*” [**The Conquest of Bread**, p. 145]). However, this point is ignored by Caplan when evaluating capitalism. And, of course, a free market is not a policy usually suited to a war situation. But the war is irrelevant to Caplan’s case, and so is ignored.

Caplan then states that “[p]resumably the poor workers of the villages did not realize that ‘equality’ would also guarantee an equal share for Anarchist soldiers who never set a foot in the village.” Of course these troops were holding back the fascists, and so would have found it hard to “set foot in the village.” It could be argued that they were supplying a “service” which many considered worth paying for. But Caplan does not seem to think that fighting fascism is a service of any kind. Many “normal” people would disagree. In addition, it should be pointed out that many at the front were Aragonese. In fact, many in the Catalonia CNT militia would have been originally from Aragon (21% of migrants to Catalonia before the war came from Aragon) and many Aragonese joined the militias when they passed through their towns and villages.

Caplan moves on to the end of the Aragon collectives and notes that “[i]n July of 1937, the Aragonese Anarchists were desperately trying to avoid the fate of their Catalonian comrades. The Communists had replaced the Anarchists as the dominant force in Catalonia. Was Aragon next?” He then quotes Jose Peirats, the Anarchist historian, to “provide” the “setting” – “In his commemorative speech on July 19, 1937, the President of the Council of Aragon was extremely pessimistic... ‘it would be regrettable if anyone tried to make trouble for [the Council of Aragon], for that would force [the Council] to unsheath its claws of iron and teeth of steel.’”

Of course, any socio-economic organisation is entitled to defend itself – Caplan does not deny this right to capitalist companies (indeed, he would prefer capitalist companies to hire “claws of iron” without having to worry that these claws are somehow accountable to those it represses). And as future events prove, these “claws of iron” were in fact non-existent (and, indeed, the accounts of the collectives indicate a specific **lack** of repression within them – e.g. Fraser’s eye-witness accounts of how the collectives operated). Caplan then goes on to note that “[i]n December of 1936, the Council agreed to share some of its power with members of other Republican parties, but the dominant position of the Anarchists remained.” Again, sharing power is hardly the policy of totalitarians and we may note that the “power” of the council was pretty limited and involved supporting and co-ordinating the activities of the collectives

Caplan goes on to state that “[c]learly in a conciliatory mood, the President emphasized that the right to farm individually would be protected (thus implicitly admitting widespread violation of this right).” What logic! But first, to correct a mistake of Caplan, the President of the Aragon council **did not make remarks**. Actually, if you read Peirats it’s clear that this remark is not

from the President, but from an “agreement signed by representatives of all political and union forces in Aragon”. This is clear from the text.

But to return to the “logic” – the fact that individual farmers would be protected (along with the right to farm it collectively) is taken to “imply” that this right had seen widespread violation. The report actually states that “the council will protect the right of peasants to work the earth individually or collectively”. I suppose that this means that the report is “implicitly” admitting widespread violation of the right to farm collectively as well! The idea that the council **did** support the rights of peasants to farm their own land (and, we may add, a fact which can be seen from membership figures in the collectives) does not cross Caplan’s mind. Funny, but stating that individualist peasant’s rights would be protected could mean exactly that – that they would, and did, oppose forced collectivisation and would “defend the smallholder.” However, such statements (like the fact of 95% voluntary collectives, 70% of the population joining) are turned by Caplan into “proof” that collectivisation was “forced” – what logic.

Caplan then quotes the agreement signed by all of the Republican factions of Aragon as follows: “The Council of Aragon, which will collaborate enthusiastically with the legitimate government of the Republic, will increase production in the rearguard, mobilize all the region’s resources for the war effort, arouse the antifascist spirit of the masses... and undertake an intense purge in the liberated zones; it will impose unrelenting order and hunt down hidden fascists, defeatists and speculators.”

And makes the statement “The totalitarian tone of these words is hard to overlook.” Lets think about this – and place it in context. Most wars result in such statements, they are made by many different political opinions. A war, particularly a civil war, requires the defence of the rear-guard against enemies who would undermine the war effort. The idea that fascists should be allowed to undermine the war effort in the name of “liberty” is a strange one. Again, as far as speculators go, such activity can and does demoralise the rear-guard and ends up with a few enriching themselves at the expense of the majority, the majority who are making the sacrifices necessary to win the war – the victory of which will also benefit the speculator. So, yes, in wars political groups often talk about “purging” the rearguard, of increasing production and so on. Does it have “totalitarian” tones? Only if the society in which these statements are made is also totalitarian. For example, the “tone” of the British war effort during world war 2 would seem “totalitarian” if quoted in the here and now, but obviously in context such statements would mean something totally different is uttered within Nazi Germany or Stalin’s Russia. In the case of Aragon, we state that the “totalitarian tone” does not imply a totalitarian reality (it does imply a society in a civil war against fascism though). Perriats notes that meetings of the Popular Front of Aragon occurred during this time (which consisted of the Communist Party, the UGT and the Republican Left). Hardly a “totalitarian” regime which allows non-regime parties to meet and organise – and so indicating well that the “tone” reflects a society in a life and death struggle against fascism (a fascism which was slaughtering tens of thousands of people at the time, I must add) and nothing more. Given the mass murder that was occurring under Franco, we can understand desires to make sure that the Republic wins the war and the rear-guard is safe from pro-fascists. But context is not Caplan’s strong point.

Caplan then moves on to the end of the Aragon Collectives. He states that “[t]he Council’s protestations of its loyalty and ecumenical spirit did not save it from an invasion of Communist-led forces under the orders of the central government. The Communists broke up many collec-

tives, even voluntary ones (although as noted the “voluntarism” of the collectives was universally questionable).”

As noted above, the voluntarism of the collectives was not “universally questionable” – far from it, given the problem of the war the Aragon collectives did a reasonable job in ensuring that individuals who did not want to join were reflected. Of course, Caplan may try to claim that individuals should not be forced to pay for the war effort, but such a support for “free riding” would be strange coming from a right-libertarian.

And he quotes Bollothen:

“the land, farm implements, horses, and cattle confiscated from right-wing supporters were returned to their former owners or to their families; new buildings erected by the collectives, such as stables and hen coops, were destroyed, and in some villages the farms were deprived even of seed for sowing, while six hundred members of the CNT were arrested.”

He concludes that “[a]fter their initial onslaught, the Communists backed off somewhat; so long as the Anarchists were out of power, the Communists were generally willing to accept a milder form of collectivization.”

However, this ignores an important result of the suppression of the collectives, namely the collapse of the rural economy. At a meeting of the agrarian commission of the Aragonese Communist Party (October 9th, 1937), Jose Silva emphasised “the little incentive to work of the entire peasant population” and that the situation brought about by the dissolution of the collectives was “grave and critical.” [quoted by Bollothen, p. 530] A few days earlier the Communist-controlled Regional Delegation of Agrarian Reform acknowledged that “in the majority of villages agricultural work was paralyzed causing great harm to our agrarian economy” [Ibid.]

If the collectives were as unpopular as Caplan claims, then why the collapse of the economy? If Lister had overturned a totalitarian anarchist regime, why did the peasants not reap the benefit of their toil? Could it be because Caplan gets it wrong? This is backed up by Yaacov Oved’s statement (from a paper submitted to the XII Congress of Sociology, Madrid, July 1990 – Oved, as far as I am aware, is not an anarchist):

“Those who were responsible for this policy [of “freeing” the Aragon Collectivists], were convinced that the farmers would greet it joyfully because they had been coerced into joining the collectives. But they were proven wrong. Except for the rich estate owners who were glad to get their land back, most of the members of the agricultural collectives objected and lacking all motivation they were reluctant to resume the same effort of in the agricultural work. This phenomenon was so widespread that the authorities and the communist minister of agriculture were forced to retreat from their hostile policy” [Yaacov Oved, **Communismo Libertario and Communalism in the Spanish Collectivisations (1936–1939)**]

In other words, the picture Caplan paints is incomplete and ignores the existence of the rural day labourers and poor peasants who supported the collectives. But, of course, people at the bottom of the social pyramid are unimportant and so can safely be overlooked.

Caplan, ignoring the fact of economic collapse, states that “Apologists for the Anarchists frequently point to the fact that many collectives persisted even after the Communist-led forces destroyed the Council of Aragon,” and answers this by stating that “[e]ven after the destruction of the Council of Aragon, might not some farmers have remained within the collectives out of

fear of later persecution if the CNT regained power?” However, this hypothesis about **some** farmers does not explain how they managed to survive or the fact that the economy collapsed. It’s undoubtedly true that many people left the collectives when they had the chance. Many people did not join freely. It’s also true that many left because of the repression by the communists. Could it be that Caplan does not present the whole picture in his account? We have noticed how he ignores the democratic nature of the collectives as well as the day workers who supported the CNT or UGT and favoured the collectives. Moreover, as far as post-collective Aragon goes, even the Communist Party noted that the old bosses took their dominating role within Aragon society back again after the Communists crushed the collectives. They obviously felt safe enough to return to their own ways, an event that must have been very widespread to get even the Communist Party to mention it. So, I think we can say that Caplan’s argument about “farmers fear” keeping the collectives going after the Communists “liberated” Aragon is simply false – the popular support for the collectives in the Aragon working class is a far more likely explanation, and one that fits the facts better.

To requote the report on the district of Valderrobes:

“Collectivisation was nevertheless opposed by opponents on the right and adversaries on the left. If the eternally idle who have been expropriated had been asked what they thought of collectivisation, some would have replied that it was robbery and others a dictatorship. But, for the elderly, the day workers, the tenant farmers and small proprietors who had always been under the thumb of the big landowners and heartless usurers, it appeared as salvation” [p. 71]

In other words, Caplan ignores a sizeable portion of the rural population in his argument against the collectives – the same portion that was “treated as animals” by the bosses, a treatment not even worth a comment by our defender of “liberty.” We must ask, then: how objective is Caplan if he ignores the existence of a whole segment of society as irrelevant, instead focusing on wealthy property owners as if they were the only ones who count?

As Yaacov Oved argues in relation to the breaking up of the collectives:

“Through the widespread reluctance of collectivists to co-operate with the new policy it became evident that most members had voluntarily joined the collectives and as soon as the policy was changed a new wave of collectives was established. However, the wheel could not be turned back. An atmosphere of distrust prevailed between the collectives and the authorities and every initiative was curtailed” [Op. Cit.]

In other words, Caplan thesis is directly questioned by Oved who uses the same sources as Caplan. This combined with Bollothen’s comments (which Caplan asks us to ignore) suggests that Caplan is wrong.

Caplan concludes as follows:

“Bollothen aptly sums up the ironclad case against the Anarchist rural collectives, a case which need not rely on Communist-tainted testimony or sources:”

“If, theoretically, during the Spanish Revolution, the CNT and FAI were opposed to the state dictatorship established by the Marxists, they nevertheless established a

form of parochial dictatorship in many localities, with the aid of vigilance groups and revolutionary tribunals. While these fell far short of the ‘scientific concept’ of totalitarian dictatorship defined by Lenin, the CNT and FAI exercised their power in a naked form not only against priests and landowners, moneylenders and merchants, but in many cases against small tradesmen and farmers.”

But he ignores the following statement immediately after it:

“But in spite of the cleavages between doctrine and practice that plagued the Spanish Anarchists whenever they collided with the realities of power, it cannot be overemphasized that notwithstanding the many instances of coercion and violence, the revolution of July 1936 distinguished itself from all others by the generally spontaneous and far-reaching character of its collectivist movement and by its promise of moral and spiritual renewal. Nothing like this spontaneous movement had ever occurred before”

This places the first statement in a new light. The thesis of “CNT dictatorship” is hardly supported by reference to a “spontaneous movement;” and, as noted by both Fraser and Bolloten, the collectives themselves were run by mass assemblies in a democratic manner. Considering that only around 20 of the 450 collectives were total, the “many localities” may not have been that widespread in Aragon and elsewhere, although we are sure they did occur. If, as Caplan claims, his case is “ironclad,” then why did he ignore so much relevant information — for example, the democratic internal nature of the collectives, the existence of the day laborers, the introduction of machinery, the collapse of the economy after the collectives were crushed, and so on? Why does “many localities” become **all** localities for Caplan? What about the fact that 70% of the population joined and 95% of the collectives were voluntary? If the CNT had created a dictatorship in Aragon, the figures would have been 100% and 0% respectively. Or the fact that collectives existed in all parts of Republican Spain (in areas nowhere near the CNT militias)? Could the existence of 1500 collectives in total (450 in Aragon) suggest that the creation of rural collectives was **not** imposed by the CNT militia?

Caplan concludes stating that “[t]his dictatorship would undoubtedly have become even more egregious if the Anarchists had ever become the dominant power in Spain; Bolloten cites numerous Anarchist publications explaining that the concessions to voluntarism and individualism were merely temporary expedients which would be withdrawn as soon as the Anarchists were too powerful to be challenged.” However as Bolloten also notes, “the official policy of the CNT...was, within certain limits, one of respect for the property of the small Republican farmer” [p. 64], and so these “concessions” were nothing of the kind.

Caplan, we are sure, thinks that he is exposing anarchist dictatorship in Aragon. But the facts do not back up his claims. Voluntary, democratic collectives are not dictatorship. Of course, he has tried to argue that those who did not join the collectives (all 150,000 of them) were “forced” to take part in the war effort. Again, this is undoubtedly true, but as the war effort was a “public good,” this is hardly surprising. All Caplan has shown is that some farmers joined the collectives because of the presence of the CNT militia and the climate caused by the war, and that in some areas, CNT members acted as dictators. However, this is not the whole picture, as we have indicated above.

In other words, his thesis of anarchist dictatorship in Aragon has not been proven, and in fact has been proved to be **false**. To requote one eye-witness from an Aragon collective:

“it was marvellous... to live in a collective, a free society where one could say what one thought, where if the village committee seemed unsatisfactory one could say. The committee took no big decisions without calling the whole village together in a general assembly. All this was wonderful” [**Blood of Spain**, p. 288]

Hardly anarchist dictatorship and more in line with Bolloten’s “few statements” on the “spontaneous character” of the collectives. Therefore, Caplan’s case against the rural collectives falls in the face of all the evidence. Evidence which Caplan was aware of but decided to ignore.

3. Economics and the Spanish Anarchists

A. Background for the Civil War: The Great Depression and the Labor Market

Caplan attempts to present a case why Spain suffered a depression in the 1930s. He notes that if “Spanish industrial production in 1929 is set equal to 100, then in 1935 it remained at a stagnant 86.9 in spite of six years’ worth of population growth.” without actually mentioning that 1933 marked the lowest point in industrial production (of 84.4) with 1934 and 1935 both seeing a slight increase in output (output in the USA was two-thirds the 1929 level in 1932, by way of contrast). And he states that unemployment was by all accounts...correspondingly high.” However, compared to other western countries unemployment in Spain was far lower: “[a]t the worse moments of the depression [in Spain] there were about a half-million unemployed, proportionally one-fourth the extent of the unemployment suffered in the United States and Germany in 1932.” [Gabriel Jackson, **The Spanish Republic and Civil War**: 1931–1939, p. 96]

According to Fraser, in 1930 over 2,500,000 people were part of the industrial working class, approximately 26% of the working population. Which means a total workforce of about 9–10 million (at least). This means that around 5–8% of the working population was unemployed in Spain, compared to around 20–30% in the USA. Therefore, while unemployment **was** high, it was very low compared to other western nations in the 1930s. This is so even if we assume that a sizeable percentage of the working population worked their own land (Paul Preston notes that in December 1933, 619 000 were unemployed, 12% of the workforce). Over 70% of the unemployed were rural workers.

This suggests that the “depression level” unemployment Spain suffered was less extreme than in other countries (due, in part to the fact Spain was less integrated into the global economy and, in part, if we accept Michal Kalecki’s analysis of capitalist crisis, to the high level of workers’ organisation which increased effective demand by distributing income to the working class – more on this later).

However, Caplan attempts to explain it in terms, firstly, of the “large consensus of economic historians [which] argues, persuasively in my view, that the essential cause of the Great Depression was the international monetary contraction of the late 20’s and early 30’s.” However, an equally large consensus argues that this is not the case. For example, “The central case [for the contraction argument] is the onset of the Great Depression... [Milton] Friedman attributed this plunge to a sharp contraction in his monetary aggregates... But the Federal Reserve did not actually pull money out of the system. What happened instead was... a wave of bank failures” which occurred due to the 1929 crash. [Paul Krugmen, **Peddling Prosperity**, p. 38] Nichola Kaldor pointed out that “[a]ccording to Friedman’s own figures, the amount of ‘high-powered money’... in the US increased, not decreased, throughout the Great Contraction: in July 1932, it was more than 10

per cent higher than in July, 1929 ... The Great Contraction of the money supply ... occurred despite this increase in the monetary base. “[“The New Monetarism”, **The Essential Kaldor**, pp. 487–8]

Other economists also investigated Friedman’s claims, with similar result. Peter Temin, for example, critiqued them from a Keynesian point of view, asking whether the decline in spending resulted from a decline in the money supply or the other way round. He noted that while the Monetarist “narrative is long and complex” it “offers far less support for [its] assertions than appears at first. In fact, it assumes the conclusion and describes the Depression in terms of it; it does not test or prove it at all.” He examined the changes in the real money balances and found that they increased between 1929 and 1931 from between 1 and 18% (depending on choice of money aggregate used and how it was deflated). Overall, the money supply not only did not decline but actually increased 5% between August 1929 and August 1931. Temin concluded that there is no evidence that money caused the depression after the stock market crash. [**Did Monetary Forces Cause the Great Depression?**, pp. 15–6 and p. 141] In other words, the depression caused the contraction, not vice versa.

Caplan notes that the “seminal academic work” by Milton Friedman and Anna Schwartz (**A Monetary History of the United States**) “established” this point of “the magnitude and importance of the monetary contraction.” However, not all economists agree. To quote Michael Stewart (**Keynes and After** – who notes correctly that “Monetarist assumptions bear little relation to reality” p. 181) this book “was supposed to show the crucial importance of the behaviour of the money supply... Yet what appears to be the concluding summary of the book (on page 695) reads as follows:

“Changes in the money stock are therefore a consequence as well as an independent source of change in money and prices. Mutual interaction, but with money rather clearly the senior partner in longer-run movements and in major cyclical movements, and more nearly an equal partner with money income and prices in shorter-run and milder movements – this is the generalisation suggested by our evidence.’

“More clearly an equal partner? Generalisation suggested by the evidence? It is little short of extraordinary that such a qualified and tentative finding should become the basis of the widespread assertion that changes in the money supply determine money incomes and prices, rather than the other way round. And some Keynesians would argue that the detailed statistical tables in the book do not in fact bear out even such a qualified and tentative finding as this.” [pp. 188–9] Another critique argued that Friedman’s assumptions have “been shown to be fallacious and the empirical evidence questionable if not totally misinterpreted.” Moreover, “none of the assumptions which Friedman made to reach his extraordinary conclusions bears any relation to reality. They were chosen precisely because they led to the desired conclusion, that inflation is a purely monetary phenomenon, originating solely in excess monetary demand.” [Thomas Balogh, **The Irrelevance of Conventional Economics**, p. 165 and p. 167]

And, I must note, when Milton’s Friedman’s ideas on monetarism were applied by the 1979 Thatcher government in the UK, they produced a massive depression which increased unemployment massively in a few years. Which suggests his ideas on the monetary nature of unemployment and recession were somewhat at odds with reality. The “rise in unemployment, from about

5 percent of the labour force to over 13 percent, had not been foreshadowed by the monetarists.” [Stewart, p. 191] Indeed, the government **changed** the way unemployment was measured in light of reality, meaning that the 13 percent figure is too low!

Moreover, the Thatcher government could not meet the money controls it set. It took until 1986 before the Tory government stopped announcing monetary targets, persuaded no doubt by the embarrassment caused by its inability to hit them. In addition, the variations in the money supply showed that Friedman’s argument on what caused inflation was also wrong. According to his theory, inflation was caused by the money supply increasing faster than the economy, yet inflation **fell** as the money supply increased. Between 1979 and 1981–2, its growth rose and was still higher in 1982–3 than it had been in 1978–9 yet inflation was down to 4.6% in 1983. As the moderate conservative MP Ian Gilmore pointed out, “[h]ad Friedmanite monetarism... been right, inflation would have been about 16 per cent in 1982–3, 11 per cent in 1983–4, and 8 per cent in 1984–5. In fact ... in the relevant years it never approached the levels infallibly predicted by monetarist doctrine.” [Ian Gilmore, **Dancing With Dogma**, p. 57 and pp. 62–3] So, as Henwood summarises, “even the periods of recession and recovery disprove monetarist dogma.” [**Wall Street**, p. 202]

Unfortunately for Caplan, Monetarism was simply wrong. It cannot be stressed enough how deeply flawed and ideological Friedman’s arguments were. As one critique noted, his assumptions have “been shown to be fallacious and the empirical evidence questionable if not totally misinterpreted.” Moreover, “none of the assumptions which Friedman made to reach his extraordinary conclusions bears any relation to reality. They were chosen precisely because they led to the desired conclusion, that inflation is a purely monetary phenomenon, originating solely in excess monetary demand.” [Thomas Balogh, **The Irrelevance of Conventional Economics**, p. 165 and p. 167] For Kaldor, Friedman’s claims that empirical evidence supported his ideology were false. “Friedman’s assertions lack[ed] any factual foundation whatsoever.” He stressed, “They ha[d] no basis in fact, and he seems to me have invented them on the spur of the moment.” [**The Scourge of Monetarism**, p. 26] There was no relationship between the money supply and inflation.

It should be noted, though, that Monetarism had the side-effect of breaking workers’ resistance to the demands of their bosses, via mass and persistence unemployment. This was what caused inflation to drop, as workers were in no position to demand wage rises in the face of rising prices. As Kaldor summarised, inflation may have dropped but this lay “in their success in transforming the labour market from a twentieth-century sellers’ market to a nineteenth-century buyers’ market, with wholesome effects on factory discipline, wage claims, and proneness to strike.” [**The Scourge of Monetarism**, p. xxiii] Another British economist described this policy memorably as “deliberately setting out to base the viability of the capitalist system on the maintenance of a large ‘industrial reserve army’ [of the unemployed] ... [it is] the incomes policy of Karl Marx.” [Thomas Balogh, **The Irrelevance of Conventional Economics**, pp. 177–8] The aim, in summary, was to swing the balance of social, economic and political power back to capital and ensure the road to (private) serfdom was followed.

Caplan, however, notes that monetary contraction “by any measure” “did not occur” in Spain and states that the “standard monetary explanation fails to explain the Spanish depression” and spends the rest of this section blaming the depression in Spain before the war on the militancy of the unions; in other words, in his view union workers priced others out of work. He states that “what other factors might be involved [to explain the Spanish depression]? The preponderance of

the evidence indicates that the Spanish labor unions, of which the CNT was foremost, through their intransigent militancy and activism, succeeded in raising real wages approximately 20% from 1929 to 1936...In their ignorance and emotional hostility to classical economic theory, the trade-unionists probably did not realise that the necessary consequence of pushing real wages so far above the market level would be massive unemployment; but massive unemployment was indeed the result. The increasing hostility to employers, sabotage, and so on undoubtedly decreased the expected marginal productivity of labor, leaving the prevailing union wage scale even farther above the market-clearing level.”

Caplan earlier bemoaned the “arrogant and paternalistic” statements of a CNT member. Here, however, he blames the depression on the workers, who were “ignorant and emotional.” Does it not even strike him that the workers could be right and he wrong? Does he really expect people facing low wages just to accept their lot and not struggle for higher wages? And by pushing the wages “above” the “market level,” could this not have increased aggregate demand and so have reduced unemployment? Of course, bosses profits may have been affected, but there is no mention of this (obviously high profits, unlike high wages, are fine). And are we to believe that the **world-wide** economic slump had nothing to do with the high level of unemployment in Spain?

This last point, namely the international context of the Great Depression, is not even considered by Caplan as “another factor.” As Raymond Carr notes, exports were down by 75% in 1934 [**The Spanish Tragedy**, p. 33]. Spanish producers faced reduced external markets for goods, either due to lack of demand or by protectionist measures of other states. In the face of an international slump, unsurprisingly production fell and workers were made unemployed. In addition, Caplan ignores the fact that by the end of 1933, 100 000 Spaniards had returned to Spain, “joining a similar number who would normally have emigrated but could not do so.” [Paul Preston, **The Coming of the Spanish Civil War**, p. 80] And we may add that Gerald Brenan (**The Spanish Labyrinth**, p. 253) noted that in the early 1930s many banks introduced a credit freeze and employers locked out workers to try and make the Republic unpopular. But Caplan ignores these factors in favour of increases in workers real wages.

However, let us assume that Caplan is correct, that unions and workers struggle against capitalist authority and exploitation had resulted in an increase of workers’ real wages above the market clearing level. There are two central flaws in his argument that decreasing workers’ real wages would have reduced unemployment.

First, it is assumed that reductions in wages (to the level of market clearing real wages) would increase the demand for goods and jobs. But investment does not occur overnight. Neither can we assume that it is always possible for a company to take on new workers. Increasing production requires more than just labour. If raw materials, production goods and facilities are not available, employment will not be increased. Therefore the assumption that labour can always be added to the existing stock is plainly unrealistic. So approximately the same number of workers working for a lower wage will merely decrease demand for goods without automatically increasing investment to compensate for this. By redistributing income from workers to capitalists the net effect would be a reduction in effective demand and so increased unemployment as gains in profits would not be applied immediately into investment (and in a slump, capitalists may be more inclined to financial caution and so delay investment until too late). Indeed, a vicious circle may result by which cuts in wages led to cuts in employment, which led to further cuts in wages.

Second, classical economics also assumes that prices depend, at least in part, on wages. If all workers accepted a cut in wages, then all prices would fall and there would be no effective reduction in the real wages of workers. We would expect that Caplan would have recognised this, but this would only have got in the way of his anti-union argument. Of course, we could assume that cutting wages has no impact on prices (if so, where does the excess money end up? In the capitalist pocket, as usual). If prices do not fall it is still worse, for then real wages are reduced and unemployment is increased directly by the fall in consumer demand.

So, from these considerations (put most famously by Keynes but more powerfully by Michal Kalecki) we can say that Caplan's claims are questionable in the extreme. Indeed, there may be no means by which labour as a whole can reduce its real wage to a given figure by means of the normal capitalist market. Indeed, attempts to do so within the capitalist market may result in **increased** unemployment, not less. So, we may note, the likely effect of CNT and UGT activity may have been to **reduce** unemployment in Spain by increasing effective demand within the local economy.

There is extensive evidence from real life (as opposed to "classical economic theory") to suggest that my explanations for unemployment are more correct than Caplan's. Will Hutton, the UK based neo-Keynesian economist, provides an excellent critique of the fallacies of "classical economic theory" and how it views the labour market in **The State We're In**. The classical theory essentially views the labour market as any other market. This is wrong (and ethically dubious) simply because workers are not a commodity. While capitalism tries to treat labour as analogous to all other commodities, it denies the key distinction between labour and other "resources" namely its inseparability from its bearer – hence labour unlike other "property" is endowed with will and agency, feelings and reason, hopes and dreams and so when one speaks of selling labor there is a necessary subjugation of will.

Reality bares out the poverty of classical and neo-classical ideas on the labour market. As Hutton summarises, the "level of employment refuses to respond to lower wages" [**The State We're In**, p. 105] and so attempts to commodify labour, as well as provoking labour struggle in defence of individual self-respect and autonomy, will fail to reduce unemployment (and, in all likelihood, increase social disruption, crime, alienation and individual disempowerment). So, perhaps, the trade unionists had more than enough reasons to be "hostile" to a set of economic dogmas which reduced them to the level of "resources" along with iron and corn (in other words, dehumanised them) as well as having little in common with actual economic life.

How, Caplan claims that it was union activism that caused unemployment by increasing wages above market levels. This theory, however, is contradicted by real life evidence. To quote Hutton, "the British economists David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald [examined] ... the data in twelve countries about the actual relation between wages and unemployment – and what they have discovered is another major challenge to the free market account of the labour market... [They found] precisely the opposite relationship [than that predicted "classical economic theory"]". The higher the wages, the lower the local unemployment – and the lower the wages, the higher the local unemployment. As they say, this is not a conclusion that can be squared with free market text-book theories of how a competitive labour market should work" [Op. Cit., p. 102]

Therefore, in a real economy (as opposed to a text-book one) there are many equilibria and that a "cut in real wages [like Caplan is suggesting] is ... likely to reduce workers' consumption and, via the Multiplier mechanism... the incomes and consumption of other workers. Thus there

will be a fall in the output of the economy and a rise, not a fall, in employment.” [Michael Stewart, **Keynes and After**, p. 184]

As noted above, I suggested that increased wages could reduce unemployment by increasing aggregate demand. The evidence suggests that this is true, and so CNT activism reduced unemployment by increasing the buying power of unionised workers. Hutton also presents extensive evidence that indicates that there are real costs involved in companies laying off workers and employing new ones at lower wages, something “classical economic theory” ignores. All these factors ensure that the “ignorance and emotional hostility to classical economic theory” Caplan assigns to the trade union militants is false and that their hostility to classical economic theory came from their real life experiences which proved that such theory was wrong and their rejection of the idea that workers should be treated like a commodity (i.e. as a thing like iron or corn).

Caplan then bemoans the “ample assistance from the government” that the unions received, which “sometimes greatly improved the labor unions’ bargaining position” (without noting that the world slump started in 1929, the Republic was declared in 1931 and so these measures were in **response** to existing unemployment and slump, **not** their cause! Of course, Caplan can argue that this response made things worse, but as I will indicate, the facts do not back this up).

He quotes Paul Preston as follows:

“The so-called ‘decree of municipal boundaries’ prevent the hiring of outside labor while local workers in a given municipality remained unemployed. It struck at the landowners’ most potent weapon, the power to break strikes and keep down wages by the import of cheap blackleg labor.”

Obviously, landowners rights are more important than wage workers, in Caplan’s view. As the law code of every state defends the power of property, could these laws not be considered as a means to balance the power between sides? Of course, Caplan seems to think it a truism that the law code should be so framed as to protect the landowners’ “most potent weapon” however, those not blinded by ideology are entitled to ask for proof of such an assumption.

I should also note that there was a simple solution to much of the unemployment in Spain during the 1930s, namely land reform. Given the international depression which had reduced exports by a massive amount, the capitalist landlords decided to restrict production, making hundreds of thousands of land workers unemployed (whose ranks were increased because emigration was no longer an option). However these workers needed food, and the land was left unworked. With 70% of the unemployed land workers, unemployment could have been more than halved by workers simply refusing to acknowledge capitalist monopoly. Such an option of course would violate the landowners rights to make a profit, so the rural workers right to life was instead violated and hundreds of thousands of workers forced to rot in idleness and poverty.

Caplan quotes Preston again:

“Largo Caballero did something that Primo de Rivera had not been able to do: he introduced arbitration committees for rural wages and working conditions, which had previously been subject only to the whim of the owners. One of the rights now to be protected was the newly introduced eight-hour day. Given that, previously, the braceros had been expected to work from sunup to sundown, this meant that

owners would either have to pay overtime or else employ more men to do the same work. [Or produce less output, which was probably the most important response. -B.C.] Finally, in order to prevent the owners from sabotaging these measures by lock-outs, a decree of obligatory cultivation prevented them from taking their land out of operation.”

Obviously braceros should work “from sunup to sundown,” subject “only to the whim of the owners.” Hardly an environment which suggests much liberty or dignity for the braceros, but (as usual) it is the workers who Caplan blames for unemployment, not the bosses or capitalism. Of course Caplan does not question the fundamentals of classical economics and assumes that workers are happy to be at the “whim” of the boss. He also does not question the assumption that by reducing wages, a boss can expand production, that he will expand production, and if he does, will be able to sell its output.

However, increasing production requires more than just labour. If, as is likely in a depression, plant, markets and investment are not available, then employment will not increase no matter how low the wages go. In addition, bosses may just replace current workers with cheaper ones, or use the threat of so doing to reduce wages. Hence, unemployment may not be affected. And lastly, goods must be sold, but purchasing power may decline and so goods may not be sold.

In other words, unless one has blind faith in classical economics, there is no reason to assume that cutting wages will reduce unemployment or even that cutting wages is a possibility. Maybe Caplan is being arrogant here when attacking the “selfishness” of the workers? No, such a thought does not cross his mind, no more than the thought that workers may not wish to be treated as commodities and subject to the whim of the boss.

He continues: “Thus, while it avoided the monetary contraction which plagued other nations in the early 30’s, Spain enjoyed a depression courtesy of its militant labor unions, assisted by the labor laws of the Republican government.”

What is interesting, however, is the fact he does not mention that the “pro-labour” government was replaced by a “pro-capital” government in 1933 (nor does he mention that under the “pro-labour” government the “machinery to enforce the decrees was almost non-existent” [Paul Preston, **The Coming of the Spanish Civil War**, p. 83]). This new government did not enforce the social reforms of the previous government and its repression of the labour movement earned this time the expression “Two Black Years.”

According to Preston, the new government “dismantled the entire social legislation of the Republic as it applied to rural areas” [p. 125]. According to Murray Bookchin, “the new ministry began an unconscionable assault upon the meagre social legislation enacted by the Constituent Cortes. Agrarian reform, limited as it was, came to a dead halt. Pro-industry chairmen replaced Largo Caballero’s pro-labour (more precisely pro-Socialist) appointees. Agricultural wage increases achieved under the Azana coalition were rolled back 40–50 percent.” [**The Spanish Anarchists**, p. 255] Falling rural wages is confirmed by Raymond Carr (**the Spanish Tragedy**, p. 49) along with the eviction of tenants — as does Preston (“Members of the FNTT union were systematically being refused work, and wages had dropped by 60 percent” by January 1934, [p. 135])

Now, if Caplan’s claims are true we would expect to see a fall in unemployment as the landlords were no longer subjected to “outside” interference and wages fell. The opposite is the case — “Once landlords began to ignore social legislation entirely and take reprisals for the discomfort of the

previous two years, unemployment rose even further. By April 1934 it had reached 703 000.” [**The Coming of the Spanish Civil War**, p. 122] and unemployment “mounted steadily throughout” 1931 to 1936 according to G. Payne, **Spain’s first democracy**, p. 154] (Payne also suggests that Caplan’s claims that real earnings increased is false, indicating that “in toto they fell back at least 3 percent (possibly more) between 1933 and 1935” [p. 153] which is unsurprising, considering the anti-labour climate). By May 1935, unemployment was 732 034 and by November that year, 806 221 [Preston, p. 192]

If we look at Caplan’s “powerful unions” during the 1933–35 period we find a series of crushing **defeats** for the labour movement. In 1934, the UGT’s landworkers union the FNTT was crushed by state repression. In response to landowners taking “advantage of official acquiescence to slash wages and discriminate against union labour” [Preston, p. 148] the FNTT organised a strike. The result? A crushing defeat for the union — “There were no longer any rural unions, social legislation or municipal authorities to challenge the dominance of the caciques” and the “Casa del Pueblo [union halls] were not reopened and the FNTT was effectively crippled until 1936.” [Preston, p. 153]

In industry, union after union of the UGT “was drawn into strikes and defeated.” [Preston, p. 155]. The CNT was recovering from the series of insurrections it had organised between 1931 and 1933 (over 30,000 CNT members were imprisoned during this time).

So between 1933 and the start of 1936, the labour movement suffered major defeats. Rural labour saw its wages cut and its organisations repressed (and some of its leaders assassinated). Industrial workers also lost many strikes. During this period of successful repression, Caplan expects us to believe that wages were unaffected! However, Payne notes a drop. And did unemployment fall? No, it increased.

In other words, his arguments do not find support in the facts.

And, I should note, the monetary contraction which plagued other nations was more likely the result of an economic down-turn than its cause (as many economists agree). Given the situation in Spain, the rise in real wages (caused in part by its militant unions at least between 1931 to 33) would have had the effect of supporting **local** production, increasing demand as wages are costs for some industries, income for others. This local demand would have helped stop the fall in production and rise in unemployment which were the result of the international slump (which reduced international trade via falling demand and protectionist methods and which predated the labor laws of the Republican government) and the activities of the local ruling class. As can be seen, under the repressive rule of pro-capital government, unemployment continued to increase (a period marked by non-enforcement of labor laws and repression directed against unions, **particularly** in rural areas).

Caplan goes on:

“Disturbed by the plight of the workers, the unions and the government simply-mindedly tried to make matters better by pushing up wages and improving working conditions. The necessary and empirically observed result was massive unemployment; many workers were simply not worth the higher price, and so no one chose to hire them. Rather than blame the unions and the ‘pro-labor’ government, many unemployed workers turned to ever greater militancy and hatred of the capitalist system.”

Obviously, the majority of people are “simple-minded” and “not worth” the “higher price.” They should be grateful to be at the “whim” of the employers and have no thoughts about self-government or being treated as persons rather than things. Of course, it never occurs to Caplan that he could be wrong about his claim that those who “simple-mindedly” blame capitalism who are responsible for capitalism’s problems. In addition, the idea that the “worth” of an individual is indicated by their market prices suggests a disregard for the dignity of life – can the worth of an individual be discovered on the market? In other words, do people have a right to life? If not, then what does that say about capitalism? Therefore their hatred of the capitalist system seems justified, given that it resulted in workers being haunted by the fear of poverty and unemployment plus having to be subjected to the authority of the boss during work.

And, as I just pointed out, under the new right-wing government between 1933 and 1935/the start of 1936, unemployment rose. The government did not “make matters worse” because it did not enforce the social reforms of the last government and repressed the labour movement. This can easily be found from Preston’s work (which Caplan quoted above). Given that rural unemployment counted for 70% of the total, this suggests that Caplan’s “blame the workers” argument is somewhat at fault (and, of course, his failure to mention the change in government is somewhat strange). Given that, due to the Great Depression affecting the world, many of Spain tradition markets for its produce had placed protectionist measures on imports, it is unsurprising that production (particularly rural production) would have been reduced, causing unemployment. However, this obvious fact is ignored in favour of an obviously ideological based argument which is somewhat contradicted by the facts.

That unemployment **increased** during the right-wing government which repressed labour and that the “powerful” unions lost strike after strike suggests that Caplan’s arguments are simply **false** and have no basis in empirical fact. Given the analysis outlined above, we can suggest that the labour defeats of the 1933–1935 period helped **increase** unemployment by cutting demand (although the effect of falling rural wage levels on the price of food, which would have increased real wages even as the unions were defeated, must be factored in). And, of course, the eviction of tenants by land-lords and the blacking of workers who refused to rip up their union cards all would have increased unemployment.

I should also point out that Caplan’s claim of “necessary and empirically observed result was massive unemployment” is not actually proven in reality. He presents no actual evidence to prove his case, just logical conclusions from **a priori** assumptions. He makes no attempt to prove his assumptions are correct and so all he states is that logically, from his assumptions, the evidence supports his analysis. Unfortunately for him, the evidence supports the direct opposition.

The high unemployment before 1933 does not prove that the actions of the unions or the changes in the law actually produced unemployment. As indicated above, there is evidence to suggest that the unemployment was caused by factors outwith union control and that union activity actually reduced unemployment by increasing aggregate demand. Indeed, the rise in unemployment under the 1933–35 right-wing government contradicts his theory as the new reforms were not enforced and the labour movement was subjected to repression by the newly empowered employers.

In other words, Caplan creates the assumptions required to prove his conclusions – this dependence on **a priori** theorems is commonplace in right-libertarian theory and will be commented upon again.

He concludes with the following:

“Perhaps the most plausible criticism of capitalist economies is that they allow useful labor and capital to go to waste. Under the circumstances, one might expect that the workers’ revolutionary take-over of their employers’ property in 1936 would have to make matters better. With all of idle workers seizing the empty factories, wouldn’t production have to increase? It did not; after the establishment of worker control, unemployment became even more severe despite the wartime economy’s massive monetary growth and conscription. The next section investigates this puzzle in detail.”

Which should prompt the question: why would the unemployed seize empty factories? The assumption here seems to be that the plant is just sitting there waiting to be used. This is likely as the plant would have been sold and not left lying about. Nor would this plant have the necessary stocks of raw materials required to start production (and, we may add, problems in actually getting raw materials was a constant problem during the civil war). However, Caplan lets his classical economics get the better of his common-sense (as we will see again and again).

Of course Caplan ignores another “plausible” criticism of capitalist economics, namely that it creates a class based society in which there are a few “order givers” and many “order takers.” In other words, it undermines liberty. But such non-economic criticism’s pass Caplan by. However, this defence of freedom against capitalist hierarchy can in part explain the CNT’s success. As J. Romero Maura argues, “the demands of the CNT went much further than those of any social democrat: with its emphasis on true equality, autogestion [self-management] and working class dignity, anarchosyndicalism made demands on the capitalist system could not possibly grant to the workers” [“The Spanish case”, page 79, from **Anarchism Today**, edited by James Joll et al.]

That Caplan ignores these **human** demands in favour of economics suggests that liberty, dignity, equality and self-management are still human needs which the capitalist system cannot possibly grant to the workers. And, we may add, never will.

B. The Economics of the Civil War: Collectivization, Inflation, and the Black Market

Caplan states that “The puzzle of urban collectivization begins at the outset. With massive unemployment still prevailing, the CNT began *closing* plants and concentrating workers in the most ‘modern’ firms. The obvious measure would have been to open the doors of every collective to the mass of unemployed workers and invite them to select their new workplace.”

However, above Caplan argues that the workers themselves controlled their workplaces right at the start. Now he claims that “the CNT” closed plants from the “outset”. This is contradictory. However, we can suggest an answer, to this contradiction, namely that when something happened in Spain Caplan agrees with it’s “the workers,” who do it and when it is something he disagrees with, it’s “the CNT.” However, real life is more complicated than this. The simple fact is that the collectives were run by the same people in all cases and acted in ways they thought best at the time.

As for closing plant to consolidate operations, this does not mean unemployment, for the workers would be given a job in the new workplaces. This rationalisation has the advantage of reducing hours and improving working conditions for all. There is more than enough evidence

that the collectives went out of their way to ensure that workers' were not sacked (see, for example, **The Free Women of Spain** p. 74 where union militants indicated that they refused to make their members unemployed and introduced such measures as the three day week). Therefore, the rationalisations did not result in more unemployment as Caplan would like to suggest.

After bemoaning the union's lack of economic understanding, Caplan states that "While this program did nothing to alleviate massive unemployment, it did have other advantages from the point of view of the employed trade unionists. It helped to curtail production, protect themselves against competition, and thus keep prices high. Moreover, it helped centralize each industry, making it somewhat easier to run them top-down, to secure compliance to the orders of the Anarchist leadership."

But Caplan has already argued that the workers originally ran each collective for their own profit. Now he claims that "the unions" were the source of this program. However, the reasons for this program may have been different than the implied desire of the "Anarchist leadership" to run them top-down. It may have been to get rid of unsafe workplaces and ensure that workers had better working conditions.

To quote Bollothen (the part in capitals being the bit that Caplan decides to replace by "... for obvious reasons):

"In accordance with this outlook, the CNT workers, sweeping along with them those of the UGT, closed down more than seventy foundries in the region of Catalonia and concentrated their equipment and personnel in twenty-four. 'IN THESE,' A SPOKESPERSON FOR THE SOCIALIZED INDUSTRY DECLARED. 'WE RECTIFIED THE DEFECTS [IN THE FOUNDRIES] OF THOSE SMALL EMPLOYERS WHO DID NOT CONCERN THEMSELVES WITH TECHNICAL MATTERS, AND WHOSE PLANTS WERE CENTRES FOR TUBERCULOSIS.' In Barcelona, the CNT and UGT woodworkers' unions — which had already set up control committees in every shop and factory and used the former employers as technical managers at the standard wage for workers — reorganized the entire industry by closing down hundreds of small workshops and concentrating production in the largest plants. In the same city the CNT carried out equally radical changes in the tanning trade, reducing 71 plants to 40, while in the glass industry, 100 plants and warehouses were cut down to 30."

Bollothen points out that the initiative came from the CNT workers, and an important aspect of **why** they did it was because of safety issues. Obviously Caplan is not able to understand why workers would desire to work in safe and healthy workplaces and close those down that might kill them. And we can quote Gaston Leval on how the decision to rationalise industries was taken:

"general assemblies were called, attended as on other occasions by the workers [of the woodworkers industry] in their thousands. The situation was examined, and in the end it was decided to take steps to put things right [in the industry]. A fair number of the largest workshops passed over to syndical control, each with its community number. The authority of the Syndicate, that is to say of the assemblies whose decisions were final, in the end prevailed. [**Collectives in the Spanish Revolution.**, p. 231]

This account is confirmed by Fraser in **Blood of Spain** and indicates that the rationalisation process was a democratic one and **not** imposed by “the Anarchist leadership.”

He quotes “the sympathetic observer” Gaston Leval as “evidence” for this hidden agenda of “the Anarchist leadership.”

“The machinery was gathered together in several workshops, sometimes in a single workshop. In this way, the regulation of production was simplified and co-ordination of effort was more effective.”

As this co-ordination and regulation was to be done by the workers themselves in anarchist theory, this does not suggest what Caplan wishes. Given desire to improve working conditions and produce “good [products] at cheap prices” (to quote one CNT militant) it is hardly surprising that workers constantly re-organised their industries and workplaces to achieve these goals. Caplan’s unsupported claims are more a product of his ideology than the facts.

He then states that “By all accounts, the workers swiftly raised their own wages, cut their own hours, and improved working conditions. One obvious motive, as mentioned earlier, was to eliminate accounting profits by simply increasing wages until no taxable profits remained.”

Or they did it because they desired better working conditions and so on. We can easily recognise that workers would not put up with the regime imposed by bosses but would act to ensure that they had safe and healthy working conditions. Also, there is plenty of evidence that collectives reduced hours because they did not have orders and had no desire to sack people [see **Free Women of Spain** for an account for this]. In addition, many eye-witnesses state that “Profit and loss was a secondary consideration” for most collectives [Fraser, p. 221] and so avoidance of the “profit tax” was not a concern of those involved (particularly as its collection seems to have been weakly enforced, if at all).

But, more importantly, there are many accounts which indicate that workers did not in fact “swiftly raised their own wages.” According to the CNT militant Santacana, “[b]ecause of economic difficulties, it was impossible to raise the workers wages” [Fraser, p. 218] in his workplace and as his workplace faced the same problems as all the others, I would imagine that this was a common occurrence. Indeed, this is confirmed when Borkenau notes (in December 1936) workers wages “had hardly been changed since May” [**The Spanish Cockpit**, p. 184]. According to data provided by Fraser, after two years of war, workers real wages had fallen (the cost of living quadrupled while wages only doubled). Therefore Caplan’s claims are not found in “all accounts”

Caplan then states that workers control made the “essential problem of the labor market before the Civil War...worse. Real wages were too high; in consequence, there was a labor surplus, or ‘unemployment.’ When the workers seized control, they simply compounded the problem by raising their own wages even further, improving working conditions (i.e., selecting more comfort and less productivity), abolishing piece rates (i.e., selecting more leisure and less productivity), and so on.”

Again, the “greedy” workers are to blame, **not** the war. Caplan quotes the experience of CNT member and textile foreman Josep Costa, who mentions that “the working week reduced to forty hours (and soon to much less because of raw materials shortages),” and as Catalonia was dependent for raw materials from outside the region, the fact of civil war may have been responsible for much of the unemployment. That this is the case can be seen from Fraser. He notes that 98 percent of the cotton required by the textile industry was imported into Catalonia [p. 230] while

the disruption of internal markets because of the war was a major problem. As he notes, it was “[d]ependent on importing the bulk of its raw materials and on selling its finished product in the rest of Spain...” [p. 217] And he notes that partial unemployment rose “mainly [due] to the short-time working in the textile industry.” [p. 234] In addition, Catalonia received its fair share of refugees, which would also have increased the unemployment figures.

Despite these obvious facts (which Caplan must have been aware of as he uses Fraser’s book as a reference), the problems facing an economy during a civil war are unmentioned by Caplan, who states that “No one seemed to realize that the higher pay and improved working conditions were the primary reason there was an unemployment problem in the first place.” Of course, Caplan seems not to realise that higher pay means higher demand and so lead to a reduction in unemployment as supply increases. And, of course, the evidence presented by members of collectives suggested that economic difficulties that occurred due to the Civil War were the root of much, if not all, of the problems that faced the Catalan economy (such as unemployment). Indeed, according to Fraser, complete unemployment actually **fell** in Catalonia by some 10 per cent in the first year, while partial unemployment doubled “owing mainly to the short-time working in the textile industry.” [p. 234] This led to the fall in overall employment bemoaned by Caplan of nearly a quarter in the first year. These facts (plus the accounts that indicate wages did not, in fact, increase, for example, according to Franz Borkenau in January 1937, “wages ... had hardly changed since May” while prices had “increased” [**The Spanish Cockpit**, p. 184] — which indicates a lower real wage due to price inflation, an inflation which Caplan is aware of as he bemoans it elsewhere) indicate that Caplan’s “neo-classical” explanation for the unemployment in Catalonia fails to meet any kind of empirical test, and so can be classed as pure ideology.

So, far from increasing unemployment, collectivisation actually decreased it. The major problem was a rise in partial unemployment, which, as noted, seems to have been the fault of lack of raw materials and a market outwith Catalonia. Therefore, the factual basis of Caplan’s case are flawed. And, to place the problems associated with a war economy in a clear light, it “is worth recalling that same phenomenon [rising overall unemployment] occurred (in a non-revolutionary context) in Britain during the first year of the Second World War, and it that it took two more years before unemployment ceased to exist.” [Fraser, p. 234f]

So, the unemployment afflicting Catalonia during the war was a product **not** of improved working conditions and wages for workers but of the war itself, the lack of raw materials and funding that it produced. The collectives actually reduced full unemployment and shared the burden of unemployment more fairly across the working class (in Badalona, for example, collectives made sure that “a proportion of those out of work were found jobs outside the textile industry” [Fraser, p. 229] and we have already noted the common practice of introducing 3 day weeks and paying workers their full wages). The international “non-interference” policies and the lack of raw materials this resulted in is a more important factor in explaining unemployment than workers desiring to improve their lot in life, as does the total break up of pre-war economic links within Spain that resulted in the existence of front-lines.

Of course, many collectives refused to sack people and instead paid their wages, thus reducing unemployment. If the collectives had followed Caplan’s advice, unemployment would have increased far more than it did. If wages decrease, so does demand. Only in classical economics does the assumption that plant can automatically increase production with increased labour hold any water. In real life, more raw materials, plant, and so forth is required **as well as** increased

labour. Therefore Caplan's classical assumptions give a radically false picture of the problems facing Catalan industry, which is unsurprising.

In addition, the policy of the state to with-hold funds from collectivised industries would have played an important role in keeping unemployment in existence. As Leval notes, "the Syndicate of the wood industry... exposed ... [the] keeping [of] tens of thousands of unemployed idleness rather than give the syndicate the money distributed among them, in order to create new industries or to keep going those which were essential but were in difficulties. The wasteful spending was preferred to the strengthening of the new social order." [**Collectives in the Spanish Revolution**, p. 337] And the deliberate restrictions of raw materials and credit by the government to collectivised industries is infamous, and also played a major role in causing unemployment. But all these obvious points are ignored by Caplan in favour of neo-classical economic dogma.

Caplan goes on to state: "There did exist a simple expedient whereby the unionized workers could have retained their privileged positions while creating opportunities for the innumerable jobless workers. They could have created an openly two-tier regime: old workers present before the collectivization get paid the high wage and get to share in the profits; new workers get a meager, market-clearing wage and don't share in the profits. Of course, to have done so would have required the trade unionists to indirectly admit that their militancy had created the problems which they had always blamed on the capitalist system. Moreover, it would have forced them to abandon their egalitarian ethic. Better to let a person rot in idleness than permit inequality."

Firstly, there was a simple way to solve the large scale unemployment before the war – namely land reform. However, Caplan seems to be bothered about people "rotting in idleness" when he can claim workers cause it. Of course, such reforms would have been a violation of the "property rights" of the capitalist landlords – far better to let hundreds of thousands of rural workers "rot in idleness" (and poverty, as there was no unemployment benefit in Spain) than allow them to abolish inequality by their own direct action. If land reform had occurred, unemployment would have fallen by around 70% as hundreds of thousands of workers took possession of the land they were barred from by the capitalist private property laws.

Secondly, here Caplan is admitting that capitalism and workers control in fact **do not** go together. And of course, it's better to be paid "meagre" wages and be at the whim of the unionised workers than to "rot in idleness" – in other words, hierarchy is fine for this "anarchist." Interesting that yet again Caplan prefers to blame the thoughts of the workers than the actual economic problems that the economy was facing (and its interesting to note that this egalitarian spirit is somewhat at odds with Caplan's earlier claims that the collectivised industries deliberately avoided the "profits" tax out of "greed" – the facts suggest otherwise, as does this opposition to a "two-tier" system but then again logic is not important when trying to score points against anarchism). And, I must note, workers did find a "simple expedient" to reduce unemployment, namely by sharing it out which reduced full unemployment but increased partial employment. This suggests an egalitarian spirit which makes a mockery of Caplan's "profit tax" theory, a theory (as we noted) he has no evidence to justify.

The assumption here is that the available raw materials and market actually existed to support such a policy. But introducing wage labour would not have solved the problem of raw materials nor plant capacity, etc. Most collectives did not have enough work for the workers they **did** have, never mind new workers. To a "classical economist" there is no such thing as "involuntary unemployment;" outside the books, however, it does exist. No amount of wage labour would

have ended the civil war or the raw material shortages (which existed over and above the state's infamous policy of refusing credit and raw materials to collectivised workplaces).

In a footnote, Caplan notes that the collectivised industries **did** show "a slight interest in the unemployed workers, since complete unemployment fell by 10 percent while partial unemployment doubled. Still, considering the depression-level unemployment at the outset of the war, the massive money supply growth, and the presence of conscription, a mere 10 percent fall (not a 10 percentage-point fall) from high pre-war unemployment is truly abysmal performance."

Given that the majority of unemployment before the war was in the rural workforce, and Catalanian rural workers mostly were smallholders, it is likely that the majority of unemployment in pre-war Catalonia was industrial. Therefore, the problems facing the collectivised industries noted above (the global depression, protectionism, the hostility of other nations to Republican Spain, lack of raw materials, lack of credit, official hostility, influx of refugees, etc.) means that the 10 percent fall is far more significant than Caplan claims. As Fraser notes, unemployment existed in the UK until 1941 and the problems facing the Catalan workers were just as bad, if not worse. And we may note, a fall of unemployment by 10 percentile points would have resulted in full employment in Catalonia (unemployment in pre-war Spain was about 8% of the working population, perhaps 12% excluding the self-employed – compared to 20–30% in the USA at the same time). A fall of 10 percentile points would have effectively **eliminated** unemployment (something which capitalism can only do during short lived boom periods). Are we seriously to expect, faced with the many economic problems I have listed (and Caplan ignores), that the collectives could have achieved in the space of a few months something capitalism itself has rarely achieved without such problems (and which the UK war-time economy couldn't do in two years)? Hardly!

Caplan then states that "Urban workers overall often suffered from urban collectivization... Unemployed workers who were previously priced out of the labor market by Catalonia's powerful unions probably found life even harder. Whether capitalists or the workers ran the factories, the redistribution from unemployed and non-union workers to employed and union workers remained constant."

In other words, the civil war had no impact on the economy; instead, it was all the fault of the unionised workers. Very believable. The available evidence indicates that Caplan's claims are a serious misrepresentation of the situation (and indicates that neo-classical economics is more an ideological weapon than an attempt to understand the real dynamics of the war-time economy).

Caplan then states that "the rural agricultural workers' plight was very different. The redistribution was not normally from one rural worker to another; rather, the mass of rural workers were exploited by the Anarchist military elite in their effort to win the war."

Here Caplan is referring to the collectives policy of giving food free to the militia at the front. As Fraser points out, "[f]eeding the columns without payment became a source of pride or resentment, depending on the villagers ideological commitment," [p. 349] and as the collectives were run by mass assemblies, the surplus that was provided reflected the collective's needs as well. This is confirmed by Benjamin Martin in his summary of the rural collectives (already quoted above) when he notes that:

"The policies to be followed by collectives were usually determined in general membership meetings that also decided upon the distribution of profits and agricultural surpluses" [**The Agony of Modernization**, p. 393]

As have as the “mass of rural workers” being “exploited by the Anarchist military elite” goes, its clear that this was **not** the case. As Martin points out, “[t]hough it is impossible to generalize about the rural land take-overs, there is little doubt that the quality of life for most peasants who participated in co-operatives and collectives notably improved.” [p. 394]

Hardly exploitation when the workers decide what happens to their surplus and feed themselves better than they did before.

As it is well known that everyone in the anarchist militia received the same rations and pay, Caplan use of the word “elite” is strange. Is he actually suggesting that every member of a militia was part of this “elite”? If so, it is a strange use of the word “elite.” However, as indicated, the evidence suggests that Caplan is false in his claim of “exploitation” and in fact most rural workers agreed to feed the militia for obvious reasons. Those who did not either submitted to the majority decision within their collective or, if an individualist, were equally “taxed” to pay for the public good provided by the troops on the front-line.

He then states that “the harsh truth reveals itself: the Anarchists took the surplus of the farmers, gave them little or nothing in return, and used it to fight the war.”

Obviously fighting on the front line against fascism is “giving them little or nothing in return.” It should also be noted that the column heads opposed the creation of the Aragon Council [Fraser, p. 350]. In addition, the collectives are documented as getting new machinery, new buildings, roads, schools, health care and so on. Most people ate better in the collectives and had access to numerous “services” which they would never had been able to afford before (for example, health care, education and so on). To state that the collectives did not give them much in return is false. And, of course, the collectives gave the poor and day workers better conditions and control over their own work than they had before. But all this is “little or nothing” in return for Caplan (who does not even mention these benefits, which is hardly surprising).

He then quotes Bollothen as confirming “that the Anarchists were over-eager to collectivize because they were desperate for supplies and intended to extort what they needed out of the peasantry.”

“By October 1936, the uncontrolled requisitioning of food and animals by the militia columns, the majority libertarian, had become so serious as to threaten, according to Joaquin Ascaso, the Anarchist president of the council, the ‘total ruin’ of the region. This, he said, impelled the council to prohibit the heads of the columns from making requisitions without its prior approval. ‘We hope that everyone, without exception, will abide by this order, thus avoiding the lamentable and paradoxical circumstance of a free people hating its liberty and its liberators, and the no less sad situation of a people totally ruined by the Revolution for which it has always yearned.’”

In other words, the council and collectives were created in order to stop requisitions by the militia and ensure that the collectives had enough for themselves. Again, the anarchists are damned if they do, damned if they don’t. Caplan is really clutching at straws here, presenting an obvious attempt to improve relations between militia and the rural population, to reduce militia requisitioning of produce, as an attempt to increase it. And I must note again, that the militia heads opposed the creation of the council of Aragon, which was created to stop these acts of random requisitioning in favour of a system in which the Aragonese population can a say in what was given and what was required for them.

Caplan goes on to say that “The urban sector simply went from bad to worse... Production fluctuated between 100 and 94 until July 1936 when the revolution broke out. Production plummeted to 82, but in the midst of chaos, transfer of control, and fighting with Nationalists, this is understandable. What is not understandable is that production never rose above the July 1936 level for as long as the war lasted. It fell to 64 in August, recovered slightly to 73 in September, and then fluctuated between 71 and 53 until April of 1938.”

Of course, the total disruption of normal raw material distribution, difficulties in exporting and importing goods, the withholding of credit and orders from collectivised workplaces by the government, and the opposition of capitalist firms outside Spain are all easily examples of why production did not rise above July 1936 levels. However, as Caplan is keen to blame all the problems of the economy on the unions, it’s easy to understand his myopic statement.

Next, he discusses the rural sector, stating that “Collectivization was most widespread in Aragon, but existed everywhere to some extent. Apologists for the Anarchist collectives find the 20 percent output increase in Aragon to be stunning evidence for the value of their institutions. (The equally drastic decline in Catalonia is often discounted because collectivization was less complete there than in Aragon.) In fact, due to the prior depressed conditions, any system which made use of idle land and workers, however inefficient, might very well have made great strides forward.”

Or it might not have, depending on the situation. Thus, comparing Aragon and Catalonia, we find that the number of collectives was 450 in the former, 80 in the latter. But Aragon saw a 20% rise in production while Catalonia saw a 20% decrease. In Catalonia, smallholdings were the norm. Does this mean that in Catalonia, where workers laboured for themselves, there was a decrease in production, while in Aragon (where, according to Caplan, they worked for the anarchist militia), there was an increase? It seems strange that being exploited by the anarchists resulted in **increased** production, particularly as Thomas noted (as quoted by Caplan) there was “increased consumption at the place of production” — in other words, that the Aragonese peasants had enough for themselves. We have already noted the collapse of the Aragon economy after Lister “freed it,” indicating that the collectives may have been more widely supported than Caplan suggests.

Caplan then goes on to suggest that “When the workers actually had control, output declined 30 to 40 percent below its previous depressed level. When the workers’ control was largely nominal, production sometimes increased by 20 percent — albeit 20 percent above the level of the depression. The urban workers who actually had control had no incentive to tap into the vast unemployed resources; doing so would merely dilute the value of each worker’s share. In contrast, the Anarchist militants who ran the agricultural collectives had no reason to keep resources idle; they weren’t really paying the peasants anyway, so why not make use of as many of them as possible. Slavery is often economically inefficient, but this is not a necessary truth; slaves may work with less energy than free workers, but the slave-owner may opt to force the slave to work so many additional hours that his overall output rises.”

Thus Caplan suggests that the rural collectives were a form of slavery. However, there is a few problems with this claim. Firstly, the collectives were run by mass assemblies and elected committees, i.e. workers’ control was **far** from “nominal.” We have quoted the evidence above and will not repeat ourselves here beyond re-quoting this short summary on how the collectives worked:

“The policies to be followed by collectives were usually determined in general membership meetings that also decided upon the distribution of profits and agricultural surpluses” [**The Agony of Modernization**, p. 393]

It is hardly credible that a system of “slavery” would be based on workers’ control of both policy **and** product, democracy and free debate. As discussed above, Caplan claims of “slavery” have to be rejected as false as he ignores counter-evidence that puts his case into doubt.

In addition, it should be noted that the 20 per cent increase in production was in relation not to a previous “depression” level but on a year that had seen “a good crop.” [Fraser, p. 370] In other words, Caplan yet again gets his facts wrong. The rural collectives, due to the extensive workers’ control on which they were based, saw an increase of production over a previous years good crop. Unsurprisingly, “[t]hough it is impossible to generalize about the rural land takeovers, there is little doubt that the quality of life for most peasants who participated in cooperatives and collectives notably improved” [**The Agony of Modernization**, p. 394] which is a conclusion shared by all historians on the subject.

Therefore, given the overwhelming evidence (which he ignores), Caplan’s statements about rural slavery can be ignored as the nonsense they are. If anything, the evidence supports Kropotkin’s claim that “their [the economists] thesis in favour of **private property** against all other forms of **possession**, should not the economists demonstrate that under the form of communal property land never produces such rich harvests as when the possession is private. But this they could not prove; in fact, it is the contrary that has been observed.” [**The Conquest of Bread**, p. 146]

Caplan, not wanting to admit to this possibility, instead charges the anarchists with enslaving the rural population. Unfortunately the facts do not back him up.

He then states:

“Kelsey notes that women and even elderly farmers toiled in the fields under Anarchist rule. ‘Throughout the collectives many people were working harder and longer than before. The large number of men who had gone to man the front-lines meant that others, including women and older people, were needed to assist with much of the work. Many writers found that contrary to this being resented people were ready and willing to work extra hours and that, as at Graus, pensions were actually looked upon as something of an insult, older workers demanding the right to give their labour as everyone else.’ An alternative explanation for the same facts is that the Anarchist leaders terrorized as many people as possible to work in the fields, and that the victims were too frightened to inform Anarchist journalists of the real story.”

But this hypothesis does not explain the oral testimony gathered later by Fraser, which indicates that the vast majority of collectives were run by democratic means and that many of those whom joined had relatives at the front. In addition, if people were so terrified under the Anarchists, why did agriculture collapse after Lister “freed” Aragon, and why did many collectives continue? In other words, Kelsey’s comments are as true as Caplan’s. Some people working in the collectives did not want to be there, but many others did. Of course, Caplan also ignores the fact that many villages had seen “large numbers of volunteers ...join[ing] the [militia] columns”

[Kesley, p. 163] and the obvious fact that the villagers knew what fascism was and desired to stop it. In addition, the fact that many of the younger population left to fight at the front would have ensured a lack of person power in the villages they left, so ensuring that many older people and women had to join in the work effort.

Caplan, by ignoring these realities of the Aragon rural economy, produces an argument that is seriously flawed and one that has little basis in the facts of the situation.

C. The Dilemma, Part I: Capitalist Anarchism

Here Caplan argues that if workers owned their own mean of production it would still be a capitalist system, because “there is still private property in the means of production, it simply has different owners than before. The economy functions the same as it always did: the workers at each firm do their best to enrich themselves by selling desired products to consumers; there is inequality due to both ability and luck; firms compete for customers. Nothing is changed except the recipient of the dividends.”

This statement is simply false, as there is no capitalist class and so the workers work for themselves. Moreover, the power relations within the workplace are drastically changed, with hierarchy replaced with self-management (Proudhon’s “industrial democracy must ... succeed industrial feudalism” in other words [**Selected Writings**, p. 167]). As Proudhon argued, “either the workman... will be simply the employee of the proprietor-capitalist-promoter; or he will participate in the chances of loss or gain of the establishment... [and] become an associate” for “[i]n the first case the workman is subordinated, exploited: his permanent condition is one of obedience and poverty. In the second he resumes his dignity as a man and citizen... he forms part of the producing organisation, of which he was before but the slave ... he forms part of the sovereign power, of which he was before but the subject... it is necessary to form an ASSOCIATION among the workers ... because without that, they would remain related as subordinates and superiors, and there would ensue two industrial castes of masters and wage workers, which is repugnant to a free and democratic society.” [**The General Idea of the Revolution**, pp. 215–6]

In other words, from an **anarchist** perspective, **something has changed** within the collectives (and it has nothing to do with who got the dividends). The collectives effectively replaced autocratic rule by capitalists with self-management, the elimination of hierarchy with self-government, an increase in freedom. It says a lot about his “libertarian” politics that Caplan ignores this utter transformation in the authority structures within the workplace. And given that the workers did not employ themselves as wage labours, such a system was **not** capitalist. This is a conclusion shared by many people, socialists and non-socialists alike, the most famous non-socialist being (perhaps) John Stuart Mill (although according to Ludwig von Mises, Mill was, in fact, a socialist – given Mill’s awareness that wage-labour utterly violated his liberal commitment to liberty and self-determination such a conclusion has its merits as Mill supported co-operatives as the means of extending liberty into the workplace, a position shared by anarchists and many other socialists).

Caplan states that the collectives were capitalist simply because “there is still private property in the means of production, it simply has different owners than before.” But such a position is ultimately meaningless (for example, nationalisation means that the property “simply has different owners than before,” namely the state) and ignores the fundamental defining aspect of capitalism,

namely wage labour. Thus Caplan ignores the difference between property and possession, as argued by anarchists from Godwin onward.

Unsurprisingly, then, we discover Proudhon arguing in 1851 that socialism is “the elimination of misery, the abolition of capitalism and of wage-labour, the transformation of property, ... the effective and direct sovereignty of the workers, ... the substitution of the contractual regime for the legal regime.” [quoted by John Ehrenberg, **Proudhon and his Age**, p. 111] Fourteen years later, he argued the same, with the aim of his mutualist ideas being “*the complete emancipation of the workers ... the abolition of the wage worker.*” Thus a key idea of Proudhon’s politics is the abolition of wage labour: “*Industrial Democracy must... succeed Industrial Feudalism.*” [quoted by K. Steven Vincent, **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism**, p. 222 and p. 167]

It could be argued that Proudhon was not really a socialist. This seems hard, given the universal opinion that he was one. Thus we find Karl Marx, for example, writing of “the socialism of Proudhon.” [**Capital**, vol. 1, p. 161f] Engels talked about Proudhon being “the Socialist of the small peasant and master-craftsman” and of “the Proudhon school of Socialism.” [Marx and Engels, **Selected Works**, p. 254 and p. 255] Bakunin talked about Proudhon’s “socialism, based on individual and collective liberty and upon the spontaneous action of free associations.” He considered his own ideas as “Proudhonism widely developed and pushed right to these, its final consequences” [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 100 and p. 198] Kropotkin became a socialist after reading Proudhon and called him a socialist on many occasions (for example, in his **Ethics**). For Kropotkin, while Godwin was “first theoriser of Socialism without government — that is to say, of Anarchism” Proudhon was the second as he, “without knowing Godwin’s work, laid anew the foundations of Anarchism.” He lamented that “many modern Socialists” supported “centralisation and the cult of authority” and so “have not yet reached the level of their two predecessors, Godwin and Proudhon.” [**Evolution and Environment**, pp. 26–7] These renown socialists did not consider Proudhon’s position to be in any way anti-socialist (although, of course, being critical of whether it would work and its desirability if it did). Tucker, it should be noted, called Proudhon “the father of the Anarchistic school of Socialism.” [**Instead of a Book**, p. 381]

And Proudhon’s analysis is a common socialist one. For example Karl Marx argued that “Political economy confuses, on principle, two very different kinds of private property, one of which rests on the labour of the producer himself, and the other on the exploitation of the labour of others. It forgets that the latter is not only the direct antithesis of the former, but grows on the former’s tomb and nowhere else.” Marx goes to note that “capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons” and that “the means of production and subsistence, while they remain the property of the immediate producer, are not capital. They only become capital under circumstances in which they serve at the same time as means of exploitation of, and domination over, the worker. [**Capital**, vol. 1, p. 931 and p. 938] Of course, Marx is repeating Proudhon’s analysis here (as put forth in **What is Property?**). Unsurprisingly, then, Marx (like Proudhon) notes that such a system is not capitalist:

“Let us suppose the workers are themselves in possession of their respective means of production and exchange their commodities with one another. These commodities would not be products of capital.” [Marx, **Capital**, vol. 3, p. 276]

Of course, it could be argued that neither Proudhon nor Marx (being socialists) understood what capitalism and socialism really are. However, the idea that (market) syndicalism was basi-

cally the same as capitalism was one rejected by such leading ideologues of capitalism as Ludwig von Mises and Murray Rothbard. The former concluded that while syndicalism was “not genuine socialism, that is, centralised socialism,” it would be “misleading” (as he had previously done in 1920) to call syndicalism workers’ capitalism. Rather, syndicalism was “the ideal of plundering hordes.” [Socialism, p. 270, p. 274fn, p. 275] Murray Rothbard, another leading right-“libertarian” with whom Caplan is familiar, agreed with von Mises. With the end of Stalinism, he argued for the transfer of industry from the state bureaucracy to workers by means of “private, negotiable shares” as ownership was “not to be granted to collectives or co-operatives or workers or peasants holistically, which would only bring back the ills of socialism in a decentralised and chaotic syndicalist form.” Significantly, this transfer was not to be done by the workers themselves rather it was a case of “granting shares to workers” by the state. [The Logic of Action II, p. 210 and pp. 211–2]

Thus, both von Mises and Rothbard (like Proudhon and Marx) saw market syndicalism as a form of socialism, not capitalism. At best, ironically, it could be argued along with von Mises that this was not “genuine” socialism but it is significant that both he and Marx agreed that such a system was not capitalist.

In summary, Caplan’s claims are false, co-operatives are **not** a capitalist system as the means of production belong to the immediate producer. This analysis is, as can be seen, a common socialist one, shared by anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin as well as Karl Marx. Rather than enrich the capitalist, the workers enrich themselves (independent producers, as well as being their own bosses — i.e. practice self-government, anarchy — also, to use Marx’s words, “work for themselves instead of for capital, and enrich themselves instead of the capitalist”). Thus looking at the social relationships generated within the collectives we easily see that there were fundamentally anti-capitalist and socialist as they were based upon self-management and possession rather than property.

Nevertheless, from this “simple experiment” we find the “the dilemma of the anarcho-socialist.” Namely that “If the workers seize control of their plants and run them as they wish, capitalism remains. The only way to suppress capitalism — to eliminate greed, inequality, and competition — is to force the worker-owners to do something they are unlikely to do voluntarily. To do so requires a State, an organization with sufficient firepower to impose unselfishness, equality, and co-ordination upon recalcitrant workers. One can call the State a council, a committee, a union, or by any other euphemism, but the simple truth remains: socialism requires a state.”

Firstly, if workers do seize their plant and places them under workers control they have destroyed the basis of capitalism, the wage-labour social relationship. Such a situation is **not** capitalism (as Rothbard, von Mises, Marx and Proudhon all agreed). Moreover, Caplan’s argument assumes that workers will **not** voluntarily co-operate. If workers **do** consider that co-operation between workplaces is in their best interests, then a state is not required (this process of voluntary co-operation between collectives can be seen in the revolution, as many workers’ became convinced of the benefits of co-operation and voted to federate together independently of the “collectivisation” degree). Caplan assumes that the worker-employees will act in ways **he** approves of, any other possibility must indicate that force must be used! Really, this is taking the ahistoric assumptions of neo-classical economics to new heights (or depths). As Gaston Level documents this process of voluntary co-operation was processing under the difficult political conditions of revolutionary Spain:

“local industries went through stages almost universally adopted in that revolution... [I]n the first instance **comites** nominated by the workers employed in them [were created]. Production and sales continued in each one. But very soon it was clear that this situation gave rise to competition between the factories... creating rivalries which were incompatible with the socialist and libertarian outlook [of the CNT]. So the CNT launched the watchword: ‘All industries must be ramified in the Syndicates, completely socialised, and the regime of solidarity which we have always advocated be established once and for all.’”

He goes on to note that the “idea won support immediately” [**Collectives in the Spanish Revolution**, pp. 191–2] Rather than be something which the workers would be (in Caplan’s eyes) “unlikely to do voluntarily” this federalist tendency was decided upon by different groups of workers freely, after debate and discussion in union meetings. Ronald Fraser, for example, indicates two attempts at co-operation, one in the Woodworker’s industry and the other in retail industry. Both industries discussed socialisation and the former decided to do socialise while the later rejected socialisation. In this debate within the woodworker’s industry a “union delegate would go round the small shops, point out to the workers that the conditions were unhealthy and dangerous, that the revolution was changing all this, and secure their agreement to close down and move to the union-built Double-X and the 33 EU.” [Ronald Fraser, **Blood of Spain**, p. 222]

Thus Caplan’s notions that workers would refuse to co-operate freely are proven false. And would this agreement require force to back it up? If so, then so does the capitalist firm. After all, managers and owners must have the means to impose their will on any “recalcitrant workers” that may exist. However, it is likely that the CNT created federations would require far less force than capitalist contracts as they were based on true free agreement between equals and not imposed on the weak by the strong via “market forces” and economic necessity (for more on this, see below). Rather than being an argument against anarchism, Caplan’s point is really a blow against capitalism and its inherent hierarchical nature — bosses require force to back up their orders. Co-operation between equals requires people to keep their word, something which does not require force to impose (as Kropotkin constantly argued).

And note that Caplan equates co-operation and equality with “unselfishness” when, in fact, the traditional anarchist argument for both of these is based on “selfishness” (i.e. self-interest), namely that equality and co-operation is in our best interests (in terms of liberty, material living standards, health, social relationships and so on). Indeed a very strong case can be argued that inequality and competition actually does more harm than good in all aspects of life (see, for example, Alfie Kohn’s **No Contest: The case against competition** and Andrew Glyn and David Miliband’s **Paying for Inequality: The economic costs of social injustice**). Caplan assumes that everyone will agree with his own thoughts on the subject and on the typical right-libertarian misrepresentation of anarchist viewpoints on equality and co-operation.

What is also interesting is that Caplan assumes that capitalism does **not** require a state. But how is this possible? How, for example, are property rights to be enforced against the unemployed, strikers, wage workers, the dispossessed, the homeless and so on? How are people to be forced to respect property or the power that goes with it? How are sub-branches of the same company to be forced to follow the overall company plan? To do so requires a State, an organisation with sufficient firepower to impose property rights against the non-owners. Therefore, it is “anarcho”-capitalism that requires a state (as does “actually existing capitalism”). And, of

course, if we do have a series of “private states” who need to co-operate together to provide their “product” (namely “justice” and social peace) to the property-class, such co-operation will soon lead to a cartel of armed companies, a new **public** state made up of well armed, unaccountable forces. So, “anarcho”-capitalism implies statism, a network of private states that soon will form a cartel and become a public state. Unlike every other market, the “private state” market needs co-operation between competitors in order to work. Such co-operation builds monopolisation into the system from the start.

Also, the assumptions Caplan makes about greed, inequality and competition are interesting. Could not “greed” for a more meaningful life, one without hierarchies and the economic problems resulting from competition not lead to a more egalitarian and so freer society? However, such a wide definition of “greed” (one that takes into account more than money) is lost on Caplan.

Caplan states that “A priori reasoning alone establishes this, but empiricists may be skeptical.” But only if one assumes Caplan’s assumptions, which are question begging in the extreme. As for “empiricists,” we should note that free-market experiments are usually created by authoritarian governments (i.e. dictatorships, or “democracies” in which less than 10% of people can vote), which would suggest that capitalism and democracy do not go together any more than capitalism and anti-statism. Moreover, as far as empirical evidence goes, it usually ends up **refuting** claims assumptions and claims rather than backing them up (as we have constantly indicated).

Caplan then goes on to ask, “Surely there is some ‘middle way’ which is both anarchist and socialist?” and answers by saying that “To the contrary; the experience of Spanish Anarchism could give no clearer proof that insofar as collectivization was anarchist, it was capitalist, and insofar as collectivization was socialist, it was statist. The only solution to this dilemma, if solution it may be called, is to retain the all-powerful State, but use a new word to designate it.”

Such a statement is false, as a solution could be voluntary socialisation of workplaces based on workers’ control of production — as practised in some industries in Spain (in opposition, it should be noted, to the collectivisation decree). At worst these socialised industries became like large capitalist companies but with elected managers and workforce assemblies; at best they provided workplace control and co-ordination to ensure the overall success of the socialised collectives.

Therefore, Caplan aside, socialisation goes not require “the all-powerful state,” which the defence of capitalist companies does. It is also pretty clear that Caplan considers that if the collectives **were** capitalist, they would not remain collectives for long. Hence workers’ control and capitalism do **not** go together (no matter what Caplan suggests).

He then goes on to state that “An overwhelming body of evidence from a wide variety of sources confirms that when the workers really controlled their factories, capitalism merely changed its form; it did not cease to exist.”

This is true in a sense. As many anarchists pointed out, the collectives were not truly socialist (if by socialism we mean anarcho-communism or anarcho-syndicalism rather than anarcho-mutualism or anarcho-collectivist) and in fact half-way between capitalism and anarchism. This is hardly surprising, as change does not occur “overnight,” and so problems would of course arise. However, what is false is the idea that the collectives were capitalist because of such problems. Under capitalism, workers do not “really control their factories;” does that mean capitalism is “socialism”?

He then goes on to ask, “How, one might wonder, could avowed socialists act so contrary to their principles? The workers’ behavior was not particularly different from that of wealthy Marxist professors who live in luxury while denouncing the refusal of the West to share its

wealth with the Third World. Talk is cheap. When the worker-owners had the option to enrich themselves, they seized it with few regrets.”

This is not unsurprising, as anarchism is not about people refusing to “enrich” themselves but about trying to maximise freedom and improve the living standards of those marginalised and dispossessed by capitalism. In this sense, the collectives had many features that were decidedly not capitalist, the most important being they did not employ wage labour. Caplan’s suggests that the problems caused by this “popular capitalism” would have soon resulted in the end of workers control and the creation of a new class of property owners and a state to protect those “rights.” But then the “anarcho” capitalist is faced with a problem, as workers control is **not** compatible with capitalism, and so it is **their** system that requires a state to enforce the authority of the owners.

Caplan goes on and quotes Andrade, a POUM leader, on the way workers looked upon collectives as their own, not social property. Caplan comments:

“The ‘particular working-class attitude’ to which Andrade refers is just the view that the revolution is supposed to make the workers their own bosses. Many workers took the slogans about worker-control literally. They overlooked the possibility that these slogans were intended to win their support for a revolution to replace capitalists with party bureaucrats.”

Which is a strange way of putting the CNT’s long standing policy of socialisation which had been agreed at numerous CNT congresses. In other words, Caplan is claiming that the CNT leadership all along desired to create a centralised system run by themselves. He then quotes Albert Perez-Baro (who he claims is a former member of the CNT, although this is not mentioned by Fraser)m who played a prominent role in the collectivization movement in Catalonia, from a speech given seven months after the revolution, as painting a good picture of the aspiring bureaucrats’ hidden agenda:

“...the immense majority of workers have sinned by their indiscipline; production has fallen in an alarming manner and in many instances has plummeted; the distance from the front has meant that the workers have not experienced the war with the necessary intensity. The former discipline, born of managerial coercion, is missing, and has not been replaced, owing to the lack of class-consciousness, by a self-imposed discipline in benefit of the collectivity. In an infantile manner the workers have come to believe that everything was already won... when in reality the real social revolution begins precisely in the period of constructing the Economy...”

Caplan states that “While Perez-Baro berates the workers as ‘infantile,’ he does not consider the possibility that the workers’ attitude is perfectly sensible. It is easy to see why workers expect to benefit by becoming their own bosses. Why they should believe that replacing their employers with the State or an Orwellian Anarchist council will serve their interests is a different matter.”

However, as is clear, Perez-Baro is attacking the “infantile” behaviour of ignoring the fact there was a war on and that workers should consider reconstructing the economy. As it stands, by not reconstructing the economy, the gains made by workers were lost, because credit problems resulted in the state taking over their workplaces. In addition, lack of production would have a

serious effect on the war effort. Is Caplan seriously suggesting it was in workers best interests to lose the war?

The assumption Caplan makes throughout is that socialisation means that workers are no longer their own bosses and do not benefit. However, according to a CNT militant, socialisation was not thought about like that by the CNT:

“It was our idea in the CNT that everything should start from the worker, not — as with the Communists — that everything should be run by the state. To this end we wanted to set up industrial federations — textiles, metal-working, department stores, etc. — which would be represented on an overall Economics Council which would direct the economy. Everything, including economic planning, would thus remain in the hands of the workers.” [Fraser, p. 220]

Therefore CNT militants did not consider union control to mean control by them, but by their members. These federations would only administer decisions made by the workers themselves and be under their direct control. Hence Caplan’s suggestion of a “hidden agenda” in the CNT is false.

And, as is clear from Caplan’s account, if the workers **did** embrace capitalism, then some of them would soon have stopped being their own bosses and would have become someone else’s. Hardly anarchistic. His argument seems to be if the collectives are anarchist, then capitalism will result, and if capitalism results then the collectives will stop being anarchist. Hardly convincing, and hardly leading to libertarian social relationships. (But as capitalism is **not** based on libertarian social relationships, who can blame him?).

Caplan goes on to state that “Inequality existed within collectives as well as between them. Invariably, the participants attribute the tolerance of inequality to the fact that it was impossible for one collective to impose equal wages unless the other collectives did the same. As Fraser summarizes the testimony of CNT militant Luis Santacana, ‘But the ‘single’ wage could not be introduced in his plant because it was not made general throughout the industry. Women in the factory continued to receive wages between 15 per cent and 20 per cent lower than men, and manual workers less than technicians.’ In other words, it was impossible to impose equality so long as there was competition for workers. If one firm refused to pay extra to skilled workers, they would quit and find a job where egalitarian norms were not so strictly observed.”

However, as the workplace in question was run by the workers themselves, it follows that social equality did exist. Strict “equal wages” are not the defining aspect of the anarchist principle of equality. Self-management in which each worker has equal power, meaning an equal voice in decision-making, is. It’s interesting to note that Caplan wants to replace self-management with bosses, i.e. wants to replace liberty with authority.

Caplan states that “If there is competition, exploitation is virtually impossible. This principle holds whether the competing bidders are capitalists or worker collectives,” as competition results in more skilful workers getting higher wages. But Caplan ignores a key point here. Buyers of labour power will only employ the worker if they can make **more** money from the worker than they pay him or her in wages — in other words, capitalism is based on exploitation. Kropotkin makes this point well when he wrote:

“As to the employer who pays an engineer twenty times more than a labourer, it is simply due to personal interest; if the engineer can economise \$4000 a year on the cost of production; the employer pays him \$800 ... He parts with an extra \$40 when

he expects to gain \$400 by it; and this is the essence of the Capitalist system.” [The Conquest of Bread, p. 165]

Of course, Caplan’s ignores the fact that wages are more a product of the number of available workers than any sort of individual capacity. To take a more realistic example than the one Caplan provides, if there are thousands of workers and only a few capitalist’s then the workers’ wages will fall. This means that for most workers, capitalism ensures low pay in relation to what the worker produced. Exploitation marks capitalism and Caplan’s attempts to ignore this fact are unconvincing. For most people capitalism results in being reduced to “order takers” and trying to survive on the market.

Caplan’s example also indicates a common feature of Right-libertarianism, namely paternalism. Right-libertarianism is marked, like all forms of “rugged individualism” by a (usually distant) paternalism. You have those in authority protecting the “individualist” against his friends, neighbours, fellow workers who are all trying to exploit him and hold him down. The authority figure, in this case the capitalist, protects the “good” worker from “exploitation” by his or her fellow workers by placing them in the authority structure and paying them a little more. Of course, that protection comes at a price (the capitalist must get his profit and the “individualist” must obey the rules).

When it boils down to it, the right-Libertarian is the most dedicated supporter of authority and hierarchy, all in the name of “individualism.” The idea of liberty being self-government and free association is lost on them.

Caplan then goes on to say that poor wages are the result of labour being unproductive and that “the only long-term solution for Spanish poverty was to increase the supply of capital goods in Spain; thus, once again the militant tactics of the Spanish unions were grossly counter-productive. While Spanish workers should have done everything possible to attract foreign capital, they instead chose to frighten away a large fraction of Spain’s already meager capital stock.”

In other words, by the Spanish workers standing up for their dignity and resisting being “treated like animals,” they were actually being “counter-productive.” Caplan here indicates that the best thing that workers should do is **not** resist being badly treated — not stand up for their rights but submit to the capitalist bosses and hope that capital will be attracted to their area so that they can, possibly, get a nicer boss and better conditions. What a servile character structure Caplan suggests for the majority of the population under capitalism. In other words, if you stand up for your humanity you will frighten investors away. Hardly a mental attitude which encourages liberty and respects individual dignity.

However, let us assume that Caplan is correct and workers do become so servile and capital is attracted to the area. As supply outstrips demand, workers become in a better position to get higher wages, etc. In other words, workers may find themselves unemployed as market forces result in capital disinvesting to move to better areas or other workers coming to that area and undercutting the wages of the original workers.

In other words, capitalism results in both hierarchy and unemployment (i.e. booms and slumps). This is hardly a fit society for individual freedom and dignity.

Caplan states that “the real socialist complaint against capitalism is not that capitalism exploits workers, but that it *prevents* exploitation of workers. It prevents able workers from being exploited for the benefit of less able workers, the elderly, and children.”

To put Caplan's thought more correctly, capitalism ensures that workers are exploited on behalf of the correct people — namely capitalists. Of course, Caplan seems happy to support the implications of his statements. Thus he indicates that workers' control would not exist in capitalism and that people are **only** motivated by wages. However, this need not be the case, as in reality people are motivated by many different concerns and hopes. In addition, it should be noted that if, as for Caplan, the market price reflects the value of the goods you produce then why were women paid "between 15 per cent and 20 per cent" less than men for the same work (it should be noted that the collectives reduced pay differences to this level but could not abolish it)? Or, as is more likely, that market prices are dependent on cultural and other influences (like supply and demand) than if a worker is "able"?

Of course, the logical result of Caplan's analysis is that capitalism results in **archy** (namely hierarchy) and in statism (to defend private property). In fact, given his statements on foreign capital, it's clear that both the servile character suggested by this hierarchy and the restrictions on freedom which it entails are nothing to worry about in his view. Anarchists would disagree.

D. The Dilemma, Part II: Socialist Statism

Caplan notes that even in the rural collectives, there were differences between rich and poor collectives. However, given that the collectives were apparently ruled by an "anarchist government," this seems strange. Could we not conclude that the collectives themselves decided what to do with their produce and **not** the council of Aragon? If that is so, then his case of "rural slavery" is exposed for the nonsense it is — does he really think that "slaves" control the product of their own labour? Therefore Caplan, when pointing out that there existed rich and poor rural collectives, blows his own case out the water and does not even notice. We have presented more than enough evidence to prove that the vast majority of collectives were voluntary, democratic associations based on free debate and self-management, i.e. non-statist organisations and far freer than any capitalist company.

Caplan states that "[o]verall, however, the socialist ideologue had nothing to fear from the rural collectives. For the most part, capitalism had been stamped out by the only means possible: the state. The Anarchist military was the backbone of a new monopoly on the means of coercion which was a state in everything but name."

But before the revolution, land ownership was enforced by a state, which suggests that capitalism requires a "monopoly on the means of coercion" in order to exist. Why didn't landless peasants take over estates before the revolution? Because private property rights were defended. Hence capitalism needs a state. What the "anarcho" capitalist claims is that by allowing the owner to select between competing companies which will provide the force required, liberty will be increased. It would be only liberty for the owners, however, as their workers would be subject to private states.

As we proved above, the rural collectives were not run by the anarchist military but were run by their members, in mass assemblies and decisions reached by free debate and agreement. The anarchist militia had only swept away the old capitalist means of coercion, nothing more. What Caplan fails to consider is that capitalism had not been "stamped out", it had been replaced by a freer form of society.

Moving on, Caplan claims that the existence of the anarchist militia made it “possible to use the peasantry like cattle, to make them work, feed them their subsistence, and seize the ‘surplus.’” Yet, as noted above the collectives were run democratically, and each collective worked out its own surplus. As Thomas notes, consumption increased in the collectives. Therefore Caplan’s claims of using the peasantry “like cattle” are false (as we indicated above).

He quotes Bollothen on the democratic nature of the collectives and asks “What is to be done with someone who says that he neither wishes to serve on the committee, nor consent to its rulings? Who says that he intends to work his own land, get rich, and refuse to share a peseta with anyone else? This person would receive the same treatment that any tax resister in any modern State would receive – increasingly severe threats and sanctions under he either submits or perishes.”

As 30% of the population of Aragon were not in collectives, the answer is simple – they did not have to join and could work their own land. Whether they could get rich is an interesting question, as most riches are the result of employing others to do the work while the capitalist claims the profits. Of course, we could ask the question, What would happen if a peasant before the revolution had announced that he rejected private property in land and the law that protects it, and so decided to work for himself on the land of a land owner? This person would receive the same treatment as anyone breaking the law, increasingly severe threats and sanctions until he either submitted or perished.

In other words, capitalism has its own governments and laws which protect the interests of the rich. The collectives changed these local laws in favour of a democratic system. Caplan claims that these “Anarchist ‘committees’ were governments in the standard sense of the word.” As we have indicated, the collectives were run by mass assemblies which made policy and elected committees that carried out these policies and made administration decisions. Therefore, the key aspect of government (namely hierarchical power relations) had been destroyed. The collectives were based upon horizontal links between individuals, and not power centralised in the hands of a few.

Now, compare this to private property in which the property owner holds the power of what happens on his or her property. Those working for him/her are subject to a very specific form of government and so capitalism is based upon governments in the Caplan’s sense of the word (monopoly of power over a given area). Unlike the anarchist collectives, capitalism is marked by vertical links between boss and wage workers and so is marked by obvious concentrations of power in the hands of the few). As noted above, pre-war rural Spain was noted for its rule by the cacique (local boss) who totally dominated village life and oppressed many.

Caplan’s attempt to “prove” that the anarchist collectives were actually “governments” back-fires on himself – by his own logic he proves that capitalism is based upon governments (and this form of government being fascist/dictatorial in nature).

Caplan goes on to say that “Still, initially rural collectivization was indeed fairly ‘cantonalist,’ and it is conceivable that eventually peasant mobility would have forced local committees to relax the harshness of their regimes.” But this ignores the fact that the committees in question were elected by and accountable to the collective in mass assemblies. This feature of collective life is well documented by Bollothen and Fraser (amongst others). In other words, the collectives were as relaxed as their members wanted them to be.

Caplan then states that “[t]he Anarchist leadership sensed this almost instinctively; soon voices urged regional and even national ‘federations,’” and he quotes a February 1937 congress,

without mentioning that the congress was made up of delegates from the various collectives that existed to co-ordinate their activities. In addition, he does not quote one delegate cited in Fraser, who stated that “[t]he congress was persuaded of the need for a regional federation” [Fraser, p. 366] through discussion and debate. To state that the “rest of the agreement reveals an intent to permit even more severe exploitation of the peasantry” just shows Caplan’s personal feelings and not factual reporting.

Caplan then discusses the various CNT conferences in which the CNT expressed desires for increased centralisation of collectives. As many anarchists have argued, the CNT rejected anarchist ideas totally in the examples Caplan quotes, and we can agree with him here. The rhetoric used had far more to do with the political situation than anarchist ideas.

Caplan claims that “[f]or some Anarchists, these pacts represented compromises. But then again, the CNT’s initial programs were themselves a compromise between the Anarchists who wanted total power for the CNT from the outset.” However, if the CNT had smashed the state on July 19th, would the various compromises that anarchists made, the joining of state bodies and the resulting corruption, have taken place? If the CNT had, as many anarchists thought, created a confederal assembly to co-ordinate activities (as the CNT had co-ordinated strikes before), would these betrayals of anarchist ideas taken place? We doubt it.

Caplan thinks otherwise, stating that in “the earliest days of the revolution many Anarchists and Anarchist journals cried out for an Anarchist dictatorship. These remarks often make it clear that even the Anarchist opponents of taking total power agreed that once the Nationalists were defeated, the Anarchist dictatorship would swiftly follow.”

However, this is a false account of what the anarchists were suggesting. What many anarchists were arguing was for a social revolution based around democratic collectives and federations. The anarchists would have taken part in these self-managed assemblies like any other group or union, trying to convince others of their ideas. Hardly “dictatorship” as Caplan knows. To quote a FAI member on Caplan’s “anarchist dictatorship”:

“How else could libertarian communism be brought about? It would always signify dissolution of the old parties dedicated to the idea of power, or at least make it impossible for them to pursue their politics aimed at seizure of power...the masses would have complete freedom of expression in the unions as well as...their political organisations in the district and communities” [**Anarchist Organisation: the History of the FAI**, page 188].

In other words, a self-managed system based on debate and free expression and **not** “anarchist dictatorship.” Caplan ignores these facts in favour of his own “ideas” of what the Spanish anarchists desired. I should like to point out that Caplan displays a common feature of the Libertarian right here, namely the ability to read minds. Caplan suggests that the anarchists “really” wanted an “anarchist dictatorship” while presenting no evidence that this is the case. In other words, Caplan states what he **knows** the CNT-FAI members “really” wanted as opposed to what they actually desired and argued for. That the Spanish anarchists said no such thing as Caplan wants **must** indicate how well they had hidden their “anarcho-statist” nature.

He then quotes a prominent Anarchosyndicalist saying that the CNT would “intensify collectivization and socialization, and make them complete.” However, as this statement comes from the time when workers controlled the collectives directly, it clear that the reference is to extending the revolution to create workers’ control everywhere. As far as rural collectives go, the CNT

did desire to extend them, but as CNT policy was for **voluntary** collectives, the use of “good examples” would have been the means.

As far “anarchist dictatorship” goes, if the anarchists had smashed the state and created a voluntary confederal structure based on workplace and community assemblies, it would **not** have been a “dictatorship.” This is because the assemblies would have been based on direct democracy and voluntary co-ordination – in exactly the same way that the CNT had been organised before the revolution. Hence some anarchists were urging full workers control and **not** anarchist dictatorship. It is funny that Caplan thinks that abolishing the state by self-managed unions and collectives means creating a “dictatorship”!

Caplan then states that “[i]t is evident that many of the Spanish Anarchists had such a revolution in mind; a revolution which, like other modern totalitarian revolutions, would not only enslave the body, but enslave the mind. In this light, the Anarchists’ much-praised focus on education seems far more malevolent.” But this is merely Caplan’s reading of the quotes he presents. Like many people, anarchists desire to convince others of their ideas. This is **not** enslaving the mind by any means and indicates Caplan’s paranoid thoughts on anarchists than the reality of the situation. For the record, the Spanish Anarchism movement supported the ideas of “Free schooling,” namely education that encouraged the child to think for themselves. In other words, Caplan’s paranoid ranting about “anarchists enslaving children” by educating them has no basis in fact.

Caplan concludes as follows:

“An overwhelming amount of evidence indicates that worker control never eliminated the greed, inequality, and competition for which the Anarchosyndicalists denounced the capitalist system.”

Nevertheless, workers’ control did start the process of eliminating it, and it is clear that the “greed, inequality and competition” that did exist resulted in the defeat of the experiment. As individual collectives competed, they bred inequalities between themselves and credit disappeared. This allowed the central and Catalan governments to take the collectives over and so destroy workers’ control. If the collectives had acted differently, then the revolution in Spain may have lasted longer.

So, far from disproving anarchosyndicalist ideas, the collectives proved once against that mutual aid, not mutual struggle, is in our long term interest.

Caplan then states that:

“The classical anarchists repeatedly claimed that once the state was destroyed, capitalism would automatically collapse. They were wholly in error. Insofar as the state was destroyed, capitalism merely changed its form; it did not cease to exist. Genuine worker control essentially changed the recipients of the dividends, nothing more.”

Capitalism did collapse as “the dividends” went to those who created them in the first place. Capitalism, an economy based on wage labour, had been replaced (however imperfectly) by one based on socialist principle. As Caplan pointed out, because the state was weak, the collectives could not have issued shares and got capital by that means. In other words, a state is required to protect capitalism. If the collectives **had** taken Caplan’s advice, “genuine” workers’ control

would quickly have been replaced by capitalism and a strong state would have been required to protect it.

He ends by saying that “The only feasible route for the elimination of capitalism was to create a new state (often given a new name, such as ‘council’ or ‘committee’) and coerce obedience by any means necessary.”

Again, however, this is purely Caplan’s opinion. As noted, his suggestions explicitly acknowledge the need for a state to protect capitalism. As indicated above, voluntary co-operation between collectives could have been a possible means of supporting and protecting workers’ control. This form of mutual aid existed in some places, but it was not widespread enough. So this anti-statist form of co-operation has possibilities which the collectives did not pursue far enough. Thus the only “feasible” route would have been to work freely together as equals in order to maximise the options of all and such federations would not have been a new state, regardless of Caplan’s claims (and, of course, capitalist firms can and do coerce obedience by any means necessary – the role of private “defence firms” crushing strikes and unions, shooting down pickets and even assassinating union militants is well known. But such obedience and coercion is only what is required to protect “economic liberty” – for the property owner...)

4. Philosophy and the Spanish Anarchists

Caplan in this section asks the question:

“To what extent did the tyrannies and atrocities of the Spanish Anarchists flow from their ideas? Could their ideas ever be the basis for a free and just society, given propitious circumstances?”

He answers by saying:

“The sequel argues that that the ideas of the Spanish Anarchists were utterly in error. The Spanish Anarchists faced numerous dilemmas largely because they endorsed an incoherent set of principles; and almost invariably, when they had the power, they acted on their most totalitarian impulses. These failings were on the most fundamental level epistemological; namely, the Spanish Anarchists were emotional, dogmatic zealots whose failure to theorize objectively and rigorously led millions to struggle to achieve a viciously evil goal.”

Strong words. It cannot be denied that **some** Spanish Anarchists were zealots and acted in ways that were opposed to the ideas they proclaimed to believe in. However, the whole of the movement was not like that, nor is the anarchist movement as such like that. In addition, every movement has its fair share of such individuals, and so the anarchist movement is hardly alone here. So, to generalise as Caplan does presents a radically false image of the CNT and FAI. The great majority of the Spanish movement stuck to their libertarian principles – unfortunately such practical libertarian ground work makes less interesting reading than the actions of a few zealots. So, as we will see, Caplan’s claims are fundamentally false and, ironically, can be applied to his own ideas and the movement to which he subscribes.

A. What is Freedom?

Here Caplan states that:

“The writings and words of the Spanish Anarchists, even the titles of their periodicals, proclaim their love of freedom, their desire for liberty. The classical anarchists such as Bakunin indicated that they opposed state-socialism because they rightly saw that a socialist state was inconsistent with human freedom. But what exactly did the Spanish Anarchists mean by ‘freedom’?”

After giving many examples of “anarchist intolerance”, he concludes that:

“I would never presume to tell people how they may or may not use words; I do however reserve the right to re-translates non-standard usages back into plain English. The Spanish Anarchists had no love of ‘freedom’ in the ordinary sense of the word. The ‘freedom’ of the Spanish Anarchists was the ‘freedom’ to live exactly as the Spanish Anarchists thought right.”

But Caplan ignores the majority of anarchists who agreed with him and aimed at education to put their opinions across. For example, Caplan does not mention **The Free Women** movement which organised 30,000 women and used propaganda to convince prostitutes to take up “normal” work. Instead he quotes the conversation of **two** CNT members as a “typical” anarchist viewpoint while nothing could be further from “typical” than this. Or again, there were the many anarchists who opposed assassinations and tried their best to stop them. So, while the anarchist movement did have its share of zealots (as does **any** movement), the whole movement cannot be dismissed as composed of “zealots” as Caplan attempts to do here. In fact, given the nature of the social organisations the anarchists did create, it can be seen that anarchist support for freedom was extensive (and far more than “anarcho” capitalism’s any day) and its means **very** libertarian (i.e. based on free debate between equals and the creation of viable alternatives individuals were free to join).

From the experiences of the various collectives formed during the revolution, it can be seen that the Spanish anarchists based their activities on convincing people by argument and by example. The collectives made their decisions based upon free debate and voting. This is in stark contrast with capitalist companies, which show no love for freedom and activity try to control what their employees do both in, and increasingly, out of the workplace.

Therefore Caplan is **wrong** to state that the Spanish Anarchists had no love for freedom. They had their opinions and tried to convince others of them by free discussion. Sadly, what makes good reporting is the actions of the “zealots” and not those of the majority of a movement. In the self-managed collectives they formed, the rules governing the association were made by those affected by them. Unlike capitalism, individuals governed themselves and helped form the rules that bound their associations together. To claim that the decisions these collectives reached are examples of “anarchist intolerance” is simply false, simply because (as proved) these collectives were self-managed directly by their members.

Caplan does state that “[m]any of the Spanish Anarchists were genuinely anti-statist in the standard sense of the word. But since European anarchism was essentially an offshoot of European state-socialism, the Spanish anarchists had almost no anti-state tradition upon which to build. Like the state-socialists, the Spanish anarchists were barely even aware of the long-standing anti-statist liberal tradition, which might have at least stirred them to think about what it is to be free.”

However, liberalism is **not** anti-statist (which is clear to such noted liberals as von Mises and Milton Friedman — “liberalism is not anarchism, nor has it anything whatsoever to do with anarchism” and “[f]or the liberal, the state is an absolute necessity” for the protection of “private property” and “peace” [von Mises, **Liberalism**, p. 37 and 39]. Rather it defends the need for a state and usually an elitist state based upon rule by an enlightened minority. As Karl Polyani notes, “from Macaulay to Mises, from Spencer to Sumner, there was not a militant liberal who did not express his conviction that popular democracy was a danger to capitalism.” [**The Great Transformation**, p. 226]

How “anti-state” (or even libertarian) is a philosophy that happily thinks that the majority should follow the laws made by a (rich) minority and that this is the best defence of liberty? Simply put, the right libertarian is anti-democratic, quasi-dictatorial, intolerant of countervailing institutions. Nothing is to stand in the way of the free market, and no such fripperies as democratic votes are to be allowed to upset it.

Indeed, to ensure that the masses cannot influence the “natural order” the right-libertarian must support centralised, authoritarian governments

As Brian Barry (in “The continuing Relevance of Socialism”, in **Thatcherism** edited Roberty Skidelsky) points out:

“Some observers claim to have found something paradoxical in the fact that the Thatcher regime combines liberal individualist rhetoric with authoritarian action. But there is no paradox at all. Even under the most repressive conditions ...people seek to act collectively in order to improve things for themselves, and it requires an enormous exercise of brutal power to fragment these efforts at organisation and to force people to pursue their interests individually... left to themselves, people will inevitably tend to pursue their interests through collective action – in trade unions, tenants’ associations, community organisations and local government. Only the pretty ruthless exercise of central power can defeat these tendencies: hence the common association between individualism and authoritarianism, well exemplified in the fact that the countries held up as models by the free-marketers are, without exception, authoritarian regimes” [p. 146]

Therefore, the support that Caplan’s “anti-statist” liberal tradition gives to rule by elites is clear. Only non-democratic societies can repress the collective attempts to protect society and individuals from market forces. Hence the often heard right-libertarian support for regimes which are dictatorships (benevolent in the case of Hong Kong, repressive in the case of Chile). The unadulterated free market is unalterable, and those who dislike it or suffer from it must learn to put up with it. In Rousseau’s language, they must be forced to be free.

Therefore, to claim that Liberalism is “anti-state” is laughable. It was and remains militantly in favour of the right kind of state, one in which an elite can make the laws all most obey. Hardly anti-state, and hardly libertarian. I would suggest that Caplan consider the following fact:

Anarchism, like all other forms of socialism, developed in response to the evils and authoritarian nature of a relatively free market capitalist order, run by and for (classical) Liberals. Does “freedom” mean renting your liberty out to the capitalist, who in return for ordering you about also keeps the full product of your labour and returns a fraction of it? Does “freedom” mean being dispossessed from the world, only being “free” to move about on the bits you own or can buy access to? Is “freedom” a commodity, with no money meaning no liberty? It is in response to this narrow definition of “freedom” that anarchism developed and argued against. Freedom means more than picking masters.

Perhaps this revolt by millions against capitalism at one of its most pure periods would “at least stirred him to think about what it is to be free” but instead he makes laughable statements on the “anti-state” nature of this regime of elite rule. Hardly surprising, as supporters of capitalism rarely give freedom much thought unlike the anarchist movement with its extensive discussions on what form of association increases the liberty of its members.

Moreover, many anarchists did discuss the need for tolerance and for the importance of different ideas. All anarchists recognised the importance of communism being free, explicitly arguing that those who wanted to remain independent producers, working their own land and tools, would be free to do on. Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman, Malatesta all instantly spring to mind as arguing this point and so Caplan's other claims of lack of tolerance in anarchist theory can easily be refuted.

Caplan ends by stating that “[p]erhaps if some of the Spanish Anarchists had pondered Mises' exposition of liberalism, they might have had second thoughts about the importance of tolerance, and the relationship between toleration and freedom.”

If the Spanish Anarchists **had** read Mises' exposition of liberalism they would have found this gem about “tolerance” – the “tolerance”, indeed support, of von Mises for fascism:

“It cannot be denied that Fascism and similar movements aiming at the establishment of dictatorship are full of the best intentions and that their intervention has, for the moment, saved European civilisation. The merit that Fascism has thereby won for itself will live eternally in history.” [**Liberalism**, p. 51]

Yes, indeed, Fascism in Italy and Spain did “save” capitalist civilisation, but only at the expense of freedom and (in the case of Spain) hundreds of thousands of lives. Of course, von Mises tries to excuse Fascist tyranny and murder by arguing that it was in response to the forces of the third International (i.e. Bolshevism) but in Spain and Italy, the main political forces repressed were anarchism and social democracy, **not** Leninism. Moreover, as anarchists have always opposed private property (after all, he claims that the “program of Liberalism... if condensed into a single word, would have to read: **property**” – **not** liberty, I must stress) I am sure that von Mises would attempt to “justify” Fascism as “defensive force”:

“What distinguishes Liberal from Fascist political tactics is not a difference of opinion in regard the necessity of using armed force to resist armed attackers, but a difference in the fundamental estimation of the role of violence in a struggle for power.” [Ibid., p. 50]

As the capitalists have their private property and power already, obviously any attempt to remove that power and property would be “armed attack” – just as overthrowing a King is treason. Thus von Mises “tolerance” for Fascism – like most capitalists he sees it as necessary to protect capitalism for the dangers of anarchism and socialism. Needless to say this places Caplan's attempts to use von Mises as an example of “tolerant” capitalist versus “intolerant” anarchists in a new light. How “tolerant” is a philosophy who praises Fascism and does not oppose its violence, only its use of violence to secure power (after all, the capitalists already have power and so all their use of force is “defensive” by definition).

Also, how does “tolerance” and property-rights go together in real life? The experience of Spanish workers indicates that it does not – “tolerance” is just another way of supporting the power of the boss. For example, Murray Bookchin notes “the **caciques** [big rural landowners] who threatened punitive action against entire villages that failed to return rightist candidates [in the 1936 elections], and the landlords' agents who threatened to discharge agricultural workers and tenants who failed to vote the reactionary ticket.” [**The Spanish Anarchists**, p. 255]. According to Paul Preston “[i]n Madrid offices, pressure was put on employees to vote for the Right.

Those who wanted to act as scrutineers for the Left were told that they would get into trouble if they did.” [**The Coming of the Spanish Civil War**, p. 208]

Of course, from a right-Libertarian perspective, such threats were just owners exercising their property-rights and not really a danger to freedom. But that does not suggest much “tolerance” for opposing viewpoints (and lets not forget that the fascists von Mises apologies for used violence to assassinate union and political activists before the start of the Civil War).

Thus anarchists would reject Mises “tolerance” as purely an ideological construct which is cast aside as required, for example to support Fascism. Moreover, as noted, many anarchists did argue for tolerance and did indicate the relationship between toleration and freedom (and opposed Fascism, we must note, with all their might and often lives). Therefore, to say that all the Spanish Anarchists were intolerant is not true. Needless to say, it was the intolerant ones who most visibly acted on their opinions. Perhaps Caplan would ponder the fact that free market liberalism has historically been opposed to democracy and instead supported elite rule – how libertarian is a society in which the many follow the rules the (wealthy) few make?

The question arises is toleration the key aspect of freedom? If freedom means self-government then its clear that tolerance by others is a necessary part of it. However, tolerance is not enough. For example, in the modern workplace the worker is subjected to the authority of his or her boss. This means that the individual subjected to authority becomes an “order taker” and so is no longer governing themselves. In other words, that capitalism restricts freedom. To “tolerate” authority in the name of liberty is a strange use of the word. However Caplan does not even mention the authoritarian nature of the capitalist workplace (or the well known effects of property concentrations on society and liberty outside of the workplace).

As is clear from the comments of CNT worker quoted above, the capitalist- work worker social relationship resulted in the workers being treated “like animals.” This is to be expected. If you deny someone the ability to control aspects of their own lives (in this case their labour) then hardly surprising their liberty (and dignity) is reduced. That Caplan ignores the prime concern of anarchism (namely freedom) and concentrates instead on tolerance we can imagine that he means we should tolerate oppression and wait until market forces “liberate” us from bad bosses and restrictions on liberty.

In other words, should we tolerate authority and restrictions of liberty arising from capitalist social relations? No, if human dignity and freedom are important to us. That is why anarchists are not liberals (and liberals are not anarchists, regardless of Caplan’s claims). Anarchists do not “tolerate” being treated like animals or a system which can produce such a situation. Perhaps Caplan should consider what freedom actually means himself – its clear that by “anarcho” capitalism’s “tolerance” for authority structures that they are not anarchist by any means.

B. Socialism, Liberty, and the State

In this section, Caplan discusses the statement that “Some modern admirers of the Spanish Anarchists argue that abolition of the state in Max Weber’s sense of the word was not really their aim. On this view, the Spanish Anarchists defined ‘state’ narrowly to refer only to some legitimated geographical monopolies of the use of coercion.”

He concludes that “an overwhelming volume of evidence indicates that the Spanish Anarchists repeatedly stated, as a matter of principle, that they intended to abolish the state; and context

indicates that they used the word “state” in the standard sense, for they repeatedly specified their opposition to a working-class state, parliamentary democracy, or the establishment of any sort of revolutionary power.”

Which is, of course, true. Instead they desired to create a federal system based on workers self-managed workplaces and communes. This would not be a state, because hierarchy would not exist and so each body would be autonomous. Of course, if we take Weber’s definition of what a state is, then “anarcho” capitalism does not abolish the state. The owner of private property determines the monopoly of coercion over the property they own. Hence the state is “privatised” and **not** abolished. As far as the “general libertarian law code” within which these private states work then this is clearly a monopoly over a geographical area. Hence from various viewpoints, “anarcho” capitalism does not aim to abolish the state at all and so is not anarchistic in the slightest. In addition, “anarcho”-capitalism assumes a network of “private states” (they call them “protection firms”) would exist and that co-operation between them would produce the “service” of “justice” and social peace. As they point out, a firm which does not peacefully co-operate will soon go out of business. However, what other market **requires** competitors to co-operate together in order to provide their product? None. And such co-operation will lead to a cartel forming, and so a de facto monopoly of firms in a given area. Due to the need to co-operate to provide their product, “protection firms” have a built-in tendency to form stable cartels.

Caplan then states that “In spite of this fervent belief, the Anarchists either formed or joined governments whenever they had the power to do so. The reason is that the Spanish Anarchists were completely wrong to assume that capitalism would disappear as soon as the capitalists had been ‘displaced.’ Displacing the capitalists simply meant that the workers were transformed into worker-capitalists. The result was anarchist, but not socialist. To regulate the urban collectives or collective the rural farmers, displacement of the capitalists was not enough; only a state could do the job.”

However, the decision to collaborate with political parties occurred before the collectives were formed and long before the problems of collectivisation became apparent. This decision took place in July 20–21, and resulted in the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Committees. The decision to join the Popular Front governments was motivated by a desire to ensure that the anarchists were not side-tracked by the politicians and that weapons and credit were supplied to CNT forces and collectives. The collectivisation decree was an attempt to legalise the collectives and the revolution (the stupidity of this idea is clear). So the **context** these decisions to join governments were made in are important to understand why they were taken. That Caplan ignores the context, namely the aftermath of a fascist coup and the pressing need to work to defeat it, indicates that his attempts to make out the Spanish Anarchists were “secret” “statists” is false.

Therefore the claim that the anarchists joined the government in order to destroy capitalism is false. They obviously joined them because they considered it a lesser evil than fascism – the need to work with other unions and parties was placed before their politics.

Caplan then states that:

“Herein lies the Anarchists’ dilemma: capitalist anarchism or socialist statism.”

However, as noted capitalism is not anarchist. It requires a state to protect private property rights, as Caplan himself implies. Moreover, it is a system based on private hierarchies, of the

power of the property owner (and their appointed managers) over those who happen to be on their property (i.e. in effect, a dictatorship – “property is depotism”, Proudhon). Therefore the dilemma is not between capitalism or socialism, but between capitalism and anarchism. Caplan himself acknowledges that capitalism produces inequality but he ignores the obvious conclusion – inequality in power requires force to back it up. That’s why we have never seen a stateless capitalism and never will. Therefore the anarchist’s dilemma is thus anarchism or statism (capitalist or socialist).

He goes on to ask “If inequality between collectives and within collectives is morally acceptable, what was so immoral about the pre-war inequality between capitalists and workers?” But this ignores the fact that, as one CNT militant put it, the capitalists treated workers like animals and hired assassins to gun them down. In other words, capitalism leads to hierarchy and the restriction of liberty. Inequality of social power is the key aspect of anarchist opposition to capitalism, not an abstract desire to make everyone identical in terms of material possessions.

The pre-war inequality between capitalists and workers was wrong because it leads to a denial of liberty and a corrupting ethical influence. To quote William Godwin “[t]he spirit of oppression, the spirit of servility, and the spirit of fraud, these are the immediate growth of the established administration of property. They are alike hostile to intellectual and moral improvement.” [**The Anarchist Reader**, p. 131] In other words, any system based in wage labour or hierarchical relationships in the workplace will result in a deadening of the individual and the creation of a “servile” character. This crushing of individuality springs **directly** from what Godwin called “the third degree of property” namely “a system...by which one man enters into the faculty of disposing of the produce of another man’s industry” in other words, capitalism. [Op. Cit., p. 129]

If Caplan understood basic anarchist theory, he would understand this basic point. Capitalism produces hierarchy and anarchists oppose it in the name of individual liberty and dignity.

Caplan then states that “Capitalist anarchism was so unpalatable to many of the Spanish Anarchists that they often created or participated in states to enforce socialism” however, as noted, these compromises started **before** the problems with the collectives became apparent. In fact, socialisation of certain industries occurred outwith the state and the collectivisation decree. This itself is significant as is the fact that the “The CNT’s policy was thus not the same as that pursued by the [collectivisation] decree.” [Fraser, Op. Cit., p. 213]

He concludes that “This is why I call the Spanish Anarchists ‘anarcho-statists.’ They were avowed advocates of the abolition of the state who suddenly that there was nothing wrong with the state if they ran it.”

However, in order to do this he has to ignore the fact that a large minority of anarchists opposed the collaboration with the state and instead concentrate on the few who confirm his statement. And he must ignore the context these decisions were made, the danger of the fascist uprising and that the decisions made were in light of this greater evil. Power corrupts, and it corrupts anarchists just as much as communists or capitalists. In other words, Spain shows that anarchists must not compromise their ideas and work with a lesser evil against a greater one (i.e. a democratic state against a fascist one).

Of course, due to “anarcho” capitalism’s support of capitalist authority and “general libertarian law codes” (both enforced by private states) a good case can be made that they are not anarchists in any meaningful sense of the word. Anarcho-statism can more easily, and meaningfully, be applied to their ideology than to anarchism.

C. Thought and Action

Caplan states that “The Spanish Anarchists demanded the abolition of all government in the name of human freedom; but once they had the power to do so, they both participated in and established governments which were no less oppressive than any other. The proximate cause, I have argued, is that their underlying theories of freedom, capitalism, and socialism were uniformly in error.”

Such an analysis, however, overlooks the fact that these compromises occurred **before** not **after** the problems of collectivisation. This is important and indicates that Caplan is putting in own pet theories in place of analysis. The overwhelming reason for the CNT’s compromises with the state was the threat of fascism. Therefore his theory is false and disproved by the facts. As for Caplan’s own underlying theories of freedom, capitalism and socialism they are far more uniformly in error than anarchist ones. Indeed, anarchism exists **because** liberal ideas on freedom do not deliver the goods (and only result in rule by an elite).

Caplan claims that “[t]here was however a deeper cause: The Spanish Anarchists theorised emotionally and dogmatically, insofar as they theorized at all. For the most part, they accepted their confused theories as obvious, and instead focused their attention on ‘action.’”

It is clear that the Spanish Anarchist movement was mostly a working class movement with few intellectuals taking part in it. Hence that movement reflected the realities of Spain between 1868 and 1936, namely one with high levels of illiteracy, and the need to earn a living (the CNT had no full time officials). However, Caplan is simply wrong to suggest that the Spanish anarchists did not theorised or discussed their ideas. The anarchist press disproves this argument, as does the extensive debates in CNT and FAI meetings and congresses. In fact, to take just one example, the Spanish anarchist movement was at the forefront of discussing the ideas of William Reich and sex-politics (see **Anarchist Studies**, issue no.1). Hardly what would be expected if Caplan’s claim was true.

However, Caplan is right when he states that:

“What the Spanish Anarchists failed to realize is that clear, rigorous thinking is the most important form of ‘action’ that any critic of the status quo can perform. It does no good to seize the initiative and try to change the world unless you can reasonably expect your changes to be genuine improvements.”

And that the Spanish Anarchists in fact devoted little time to “pure” theory. But their theory was moulded by the realities of life as a worker in Spain and the results of their union and anarchist activity. In other words, they created a theory which met the requirements of militant struggle and day to day organising. Therefore they did apply clear and rigorous thinking to what they were doing and their ideas, as can be seen by the extensive anarchist publications and growth in the size of the CNT and libertarian movements over a 30 year period. Such activity would have been impossible without clear and rigorous thinking on many issues.

Caplan then states that:

“Peirats explains that due to widespread illiteracy, most peasants could not read even the most elementary writings. Instead, “There were also itinerant speakers, some of them peasants, who traveled the countryside, addressing the villagers in simple words about understandable topics. The efficacy of this type of propaganda can easily be understood if we remember that the illiterate is not necessarily a brute and

that lack of learning often hides a perfectly good intellect.' Quite possibly so; but it does no good to have a 'perfectly good intellect' if you don't use it. Obviously, the CNT speakers were not giving a balanced presentation of a number of different viewpoints; they were relying on the peasants' ignorance of the existence of other points of view, hoping to win them over while keeping them essentially ignorant."

This seems a strange thing to state. Is Caplan suggesting that peasant's were not capable of asking questions and thinking for themselves? Obviously the CNT speakers (like all speakers) were presenting their ideas and argued for those ideas. However, to suggest this is "keeping them essentially ignorant" is false. The Republicans, Socialists, capitalists and so on also tried to win people over to their ideas. The anarchists were not alone in this. That the anarchists had some success in their educational efforts is also clear, suggesting that the anarchists convinced people by argument that their ideas were valid.

In addition, I would like to point out that the anarchists encouraged their fellow workers to learn to read and write, to educate themselves. If they had desired to keep them "essentially ignorant" then they would have done what the bosses had done and left them illiterate. However, the Spanish anarchists recognised the importance of education as well as explaining their own ideas (and disproving the ideas of others). To claim that this process of education and discussion was based upon keeping others "essentially ignorant" is simply false. Does this mean that Caplan's non-discussion of fascist theory in this essay means he is "keeping the reader essentially ignorant"?

The CNT did have a problem, which was that many CNT militants did "not spent a great deal of time thinking about what exactly they wanted to do" (in Caplan's words). Many (but not all, as can be seen from the works of anarchists like Isaac Puente and Diego Abad de Santillan and the many CNT congresses which discussed this issue, including the famous 1936 one) considered that "things would sort themselves out" after the revolution, which does not solve anything because what happens then depends on what people think now. However, given the injustices people faced, it's understandable that the anarchists desired to create a better life, one in which workers had more liberty and justice than under capitalism. However, they did not desire to impose their ideas on others but to get them to act for themselves. In this they were pretty successful.

As Caplan argues, "It is hard to resolve moral dilemmas sensibly when you must decide swiftly. That is why it is important to consider hypothetical issues in advance, when there is time to think about them. The Spanish Anarchists were too intellectually lazy to do so, and then blamed their poor choices on bad luck. The questions they should have asked themselves were simple, yet turned out to have profound implications. To take a few examples... What should we do if we have a chance to join the government?... What should we do if worker-controlled firms act like capitalist-controlled firms?... What limits are there to how we may treat people who disagree with us?... How is a national Economic Council different from a State, if at all?... What should be done if some workers don't want to join our Economic Council?... What should we do if some farmers don't want to join a collective?"

We could not have put it better ourselves. However, it should be noted that the Spanish Anarchists did discuss **some** of these questions. Maybe Caplan should ask himself similar questions about his own ideology? If liberalism is "anti-state," then why does liberalism support the state? Is a "general libertarian law code" not a monopoly of government and are "defence associations" not private states? How are private cops enforcing the law different from public cops? How is

this law to be decided in the first place? Why do property rights need a state? If anarchism is about freedom how can it be associated with capitalist authority relationships? What if more and more people reject the “libertarian” law code? What happens when a cartel of “defence firms” is created and starts to repress everyone, not only the working class? And so on.

He ends by saying that:

“After so many failures of this approach, it would have been refreshing if the Spanish Anarchists had tried to do precisely the opposite. Instead of proclaiming their empty devotion to ‘freedom,’ they should have enumerated precisely what they thought people should and should not be free to do. They should have tested the clarity and completeness of their principles with the aid of thought experiments in which the right answer is not immediately obvious. They should have deliberately searched for disconfirming evidence which could throw their entire paradigm in doubt. Victory is worthless if you were wrong all along.”

Again we agree. That this exactly what anarchists should be doing and are doing. And it is what many Spanish anarchists did as well (although Caplan ignores their contribution to the revolution in favour of the minority who are more useful to his argument). And we would suggest, the “anarcho” capitalists should do likewise. As indicated by Caplan, his system implies a state of some sort to protect property rights (as liberals state); however, he claims that liberalism is “anti-statist” as is capitalism. This is not the case, obviously.

However, the question arises of whether Caplan’s own ideology actually allows the clear and rigorous thought he recommends to the anarchist movement or whether it is just based upon dogma and ideologically correct assumptions. Earlier I noted Caplan’s use of **a priori** theorems when critiquing his explanation of the failings of the Spanish economy. Now would be an excellent time to discuss this further as it underlies his whole argument.

In this use of **a priori** theorems, Caplan is not alone. Right-Libertarian theory is full of it. Robert Nozick, for example, makes no attempt to prove the existence of the rights his whole theory is based upon (see **Anarchy, State and Utopia**) and his Libertarian theory is based solely upon these assumptions. Similarly, Murray Rothbard builds his theory on “natural law” and again does not attempt to prove that his assumptions are anything beyond his own prejudices. However, Ludwig von Mises indicates the full implications of this particular mode of thought (the von Mises quotes I present are cited in **Ideology and Method in Economics** by Homa Katouzian).

Von Mises begins by noting that social and economic theory “is not derived from experience; it is prior to experience...”

Which is true, in a way. A specific theory (while informed by your general experiences) is not developed in light of specific information but of general experience (i.e. few people look at data before developing a theory, they develop a theory and check it against data). Therefore, while it is obvious that experience of capitalism is necessary to develop a viable theory about how it works, the specific theory arrived at will have to get checked against reality to see if it is viable.

However, von Mises goes on to argue at length that therefore “no kind of experience can ever force us to discard or modify **a priori** theorems; they are logically prior to it and cannot be either proved by corroborative experience or disproved by experience to the contrary...”

And if this does not do justice to a full exposition of the phantasmagoria of von Mises’ **a priorism**, you may take some joy (or horror) from the following statement:

“If a contradiction appears between a theory and experience, **we must always assume** that a condition pre-supposed by the theory was not present, or else there is some error in our observation. The disagreement between the theory and the facts of experience frequently forces us to think through the problems of the theory again. **But so long as a rethinking of the theory uncovers no errors in our thinking, we are not entitled to doubt its truth**” [emphasis added]

In other words, if reality is in conflict with your ideas, do not adjust your views because reality must be at fault! The scientific method would be to revise the theory in light of the facts, however Mises rejects this approach. He rejects this in favour of ideological correctness. Caplan follows him in this and ignores the extensive facts that contradict the claims of his theory.

As I hope I have proved, Caplan’s theory only appears viable when you ignore reality and the extensive evidence he fails to mention. The would method of analysis smacks of ideology and authoritarianism, not scientific enquiry and free, critical thought. However, it also suggests something worse, a frame of mind that can support authoritarian social relationships. If the theory is correct and reality is irrelevant to the argument, then the supporter of the theory may decide that reality must be changed in order for it to meet the requirements of the theory.

This can be seen from Caplan’s analysis of the problems of capitalism, where he blames everyone and everything **but** capitalism for them. Of course, in the text-books capitalism works fine, however in reality this cannot be said to happen. So, if the theory is fine, then reality is at fault. If capitalism does not work as it should, then its because the system is not “pure” enough and so state action is required on society in order to make it fit. This process has been recognised by a few social observers. For example:

“Hayek understood, of course, that the development of an economic liberal society would always require a strong capitalist state. It is in fact no paradox that a Thatcherite intention to roll back the frontiers of the state can result in centralised power. Nor can it be sociologically surprising to find such regimes concerned with reducing intermediary centres of power in the process of reconstructing a society of free market bargaining” [A.H. Halsey, “A Sociologist’s View of Thatcherism”, **Thatcherism**, p. 183]

Therefore we see numerous right-libertarians and liberals supporting authoritarian regimes which are creating a “free market” on their populations. Hayek and Milton Friedman both supported the Fascist regime in Chile under Pinochet and the Thatcher and Reagan governments (heavily influenced by right-libertarianism) saw an increase in both state power and centralisation.

[Note: David Friedman, Milton Friedman’s son, has contacted the author of this reply to say that his father was not a supporter of the Pinochet regime, only of its economic policies. However, this I consider to be pure sophistry on the part of Milton Friedman. I argue that by praising the results of the political regime (namely the so-called “economic miracle” he talked about) he also supported the means by which it was achieved. In other words, you cannot say you oppose the means while praising the results. The means determine the ends.]

The interpretation that support for the economic policies that created the “miracle” does not imply support for the political regime that imposed them is built upon a bed of sand. To claim that the miracle was the product of the government leaving people alone to do business with each other, and depended not on terror but a drastic reduction of government’s role in the economy is nonsense. I’m sure that the experience of a bloody military coup, followed by years of threat

of arrest, “disappearances” and general ban on left-wing activism would have a **major** effect on “leaving people alone to do business” and how they did it. And, I may note, the drastic reduction of government’s role in the economy under Pinochet did not extend to the state not enforcing the new labour laws banning unions, “policing” strikes, and so on.

Yes, the economy may have been freer, but the people in that economy were not. Funny, but being free to do what the dictatorship approved of can hardly be called “economic freedom.” Interesting that Milton Friedman would fail to see this.

In the earlier versions of this reply to Caplan’s attempts to rewrite history, I foolishly assumed that most readers would have the intellectual honesty to know that the political regime has an impact on the economic life of a country. If workers are too scared to go on strike, have seen their union representatives murdered or disappeared, seen tens of thousands of their fellow citizens rounded up and dealt with, seen their liberties restricted to what the regime thinks is best for them, then to call the economic results of this regime a “miracle” and then to say that the political regime had no impact on this “miracle” is to stagger belief. And to claim that individuals who supported this “miracle” can somehow disassociate themselves from support of the regime is sophistry.

However, I have been proved wrong. Now that I am aware that human beings can seriously claim that the individuals who praise the economic results of such a regime can disassociate themselves from the terror and dictatorship that were the means by simply saying “oh, I don’t support the regime, just its economic policies” I have amended by comments and expanded upon my statement and let the reader make their own minds up.

So, I do take the point that I did not clearly state **why** I considered Milton Friedman a supporter of the Pinochet regime and have taken the opportunity to amend the comment. I think it is fair to inform readers of the reasons behind my comment, which I did not think needed to be explained (for reasons that are clear). Obviously I was wrong, many right-wingers obviously think that supporting the ends does not mean supporting the means and that “economic liberty” can actually exist in a regime which is based upon terror against ideologically incorrect persons.]

The examples of governments that supported free market economics are marked by the “free market, strong (and centralised) state” syndrome. As Alan Haworth points out:

“The aspects of Thatcherism suggestive of a ‘police state’ [listed by Peter Thorton in **Decade of Decline**] may have lacked Stalin’s grandeur of scale, but the comparison is otherwise apt ... To give the police **cate blanche** in the control of industrial disputes is, perhaps, no more than to introduce the minimum force necessary to ensure that the ground rules the market requires for its operation are observed. Likewise, it is difficult to see how a [right] libertarian could think of the Economic League (a sort of privatised secret police) as anything more than a commercial undertaking legitimately purveying its wares to other commercial undertakings who, presumably, have a ‘right to know’ certain facts about potential employers ... philosophy suggests that, in certain conditions at least, the preservation of [capitalism] is both necessary and sufficient to ensure that denial of [political freedom]. If civil liberties have survived the Thatcher years at all, it is not libertarianism we have to thanks.”
[**Anti-libertarianism**, p. 29]

This all flows from the use of **a priorism** as real life cannot be forced into the Procrustean bed of theory except by the use of state power. State power was required to create capitalism in the

first place (“the road to the free market was opened and kept open by an enormous increase in continuous, centrally organised and controlled interventionism” by the State [**The Great Transformation**, p. 140]). And, to keep society from protecting itself from the catastrophes of capitalism, state power must be used to disempower the mass of the population and restrict their liberty and ensure that free market policies could be introduced without opposition. In other words, whole countries are “forced to be free” by the use of state power.

Any ideology is marked by a series of assumptions and dogmas. Right libertarianism is marked by a desire to build whole social theories on the use of assumptions and the disregard of reality. Such an approach can only lead to the denial, firstly, of critical thinking by individuals and, secondly, the evolution of society and so of individual liberty. Life, ideas, dreams and hopes, unlike ideologies, evolve and change with individuals and society. Any attempt to reduce society to the assumptions required by **a prior** theorems will result in tyranny by the elite who hold those ideas. Therefore, von Mises’ and a host of other right-liberal and right-libertarian ideologues support for rule by elites is hardly surpassing.

Caplan states that the anarchists should be condemned for “imposing” their “half-baked” ideas on others. However, he makes no such condemnation for those who imposed capitalism on numerous populations across the world. For example, the terrible effects of the industrial revolution in Britain or the “free market” in Chile. Both cases were marked by governments representing a faction of the population and the resulting social disruption, poverty and bad working conditions are well documented. You would think that the many examples of the evil effects of capitalism would have enlightened some that maybe people do not want to be subject to market forces or treated “like animals”? Of course, Caplan can argue that this happened because the systems in question were not “pure” enough but how “pure” must it get before it is recognised that it does not work?

The fact remains that right-libertarian influenced economists and politicians imposed their “half-baked” ideas on Chile and a host of other countries, and it resulted in a stronger, more centralised state in order to make sure that the experiment worked. Indeed, the leading economist in the Pinochet free market “experiment,” de Castro, stated that the fascist regime was ideal to try out Hayek’s and Milton Friedman’s dogmas:

“it provided a lasting regime; it gave the authorities a degree of efficiency that it was not possible to obtain in a democratic regime; and it made possible the application of a model developed by experts and that did not depend upon the social reactions produced by its implementation.” [quoted in **The Radical Right and the Welfare State**, p. 90]

Dictatorship and terror are effective means of creating the atomised individualists required for free market capitalist assumptions. And the effects of these “half-baked” ideas “imposed” upon the Chilean people? Increased inequality, lower wages (in 1983, they were 86.7% of the 1970 level) and working conditions for the working class, increased pollution, state terror and so forth. Unlike the Spanish anarchists, who convinced working people by argument and example of their ideas, Right-Libertarians most definitely “imposed” their “half-baked” ideas **by use of the state** across the world – states which end up more centralised and authoritarian than before the (classical) liberals got hold of it.

Of course, in most experiments in free market capitalism the experts rush to aid those who are imposing it. Experts like Caplan whose class interests (so clearly shown in his essay) allow him to

ignore the results of the experiments until they fail and then can claim it was because they were not “pure” enough. But the fact remains, state action resulted in capitalism and this capitalism resulted in massive poverty, social disruption and terrible working and living conditions. In the end, of course, things improved (partly because of empire building) but the claim that the ends justify the means hardly seems a useful one here.

Unlike the experts, the anarchists in Spain tried to convince ordinary people of their ideas. Their success is denounced by Caplan as “emotional” and “ignorant.” Could it be that the opposite is the case, that people like Caplan are the ones who seek to impose their ideas by claiming “scientific truth” as the means? Bakunin’s warnings about the class interests of experts spring to mind here. Perhaps Caplan should ponder these words of Bakunin in which he indicates the negative effects of running society by means of science books (negative effects proved beyond doubt the Pinochet’s regime in Chile and other experiments in “free market” capitalism imposed by strong states):

“human science is always and necessarily imperfect...were we to force the practical life of men – collective as well as individual – into rigorous and exclusive conformity with the latest data of science, we would thus condemn society as well as individuals to suffer martyrdom on a Procrustean bed, which would soon dislocate and stifle them, since life is always an infinitely greater thing than science.” [**The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, ed. G.P. Maximov, p. 79]

5. Conclusion

Here Caplan states that “[i]n fact, the Spanish Anarchists were ultimately just a third faction of totalitarians.” As we have hoped to indicate this is not an accurate statement and presented more than enough evidence to prove that it is, in fact, totally wrong. However, its up to the reader to decide.

In the last section, we quoted von Mises on the basic philosophy of right Libertarianism, namely if reality contradicts your theory, ignore reality. Caplan gives an excellent example of this in practice in his essay on the Spanish Anarchists. His ideology assumes that socialism must lead to totalitarianism (or, usually, **is** totalitarian). Therefore he gathers his evidence to prove this thesis. However, to do so he must ignore essential facts and so he does so. He is aware of these facts, they are in the books he references, however he does not cite any of them. In addition, he ignores common-sense economic facts in favour of neo-classical theory. Noam Chomsky (in **Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship**) indicated that political ideologies often get in the way of objectivity. Caplan proves Chomsky’s thesis time and time again.

Caplan concludes by arguing that: “If they investigate the history of Anarchism during the Spanish Civil War, they will be tremendously disappointed. The experience of the Spanish Anarchists does not reveal any ‘third way’; to the contrary, their experience eloquently affirms that state-socialism and free-market anarchism are the two theoretical poles between which all actual societies lie. The choice cannot be evaded. The only alternative is to take yet another look at the endpoints of the political spectrum and see if one has been rejected too hastily.”

However, “free market” capitalism requires a state and police forces and is based on deeply hierarchical social relationships (i.e. **archy**), and so is **not** anarchism. As such a system will quickly undermine workers’ control, it is clear that it is based on a class of order givers (capitalists) and order takers (workers). Hence the claim the capitalism is anarchist is false. Looking over Caplan’s arguments it is clear that he does not even recognise this obvious fact and that there may be other options between state-socialism and state-capitalism. This is why the Spanish Revolution is so important, as it can be used to piece together lessons with which to inform our activity now.

Caplan’s attempts to force the facts of the Spanish Revolution into the Procrustean bed of his ideology indicate that even as a set of libertarian ideas, “anarcho”-capitalism is lacking – it has more in common with theology than science and dogma than freedom. So, regardless of Caplan’s claims, the question of whether capitalism will be replaced does not boil down to economic efficiency, but of whether we want to take the responsibility of freedom and organise together to take control over own lives. The experience of the Spanish Revolution (once the full picture is presented) eloquently affirms that capitalism and anarchism are totally opposed and that freedom can only be extended and protected by getting rid of capitalism and the state which is required to protect it.

Caplan, like most right-libertarians, sees things in black and white terms – “individualism” or “collectivism”, “free markets” or “statism.” But do we just have “two choices”? No, we have to

create our own “third choice” — one that is based on liberty and not authority. As both state socialism and capitalism clearly produce states and authoritarian social relationships, we have to reject both and try to work out what we can learn from history and the world around us. Caplan, by forcing history between his two poles, indicates that “anarcho” capitalism excludes itself from this process as well as any claim of being anarchist.

The choice we have is between free production or wage slavery. We must try to extend liberty in all areas of life, and that includes production. As Proudhon puts it, to keep capitalism means that “the workers ... would remain related as subordinates and superiors, and there would ensue two industrial castes of masters and wage-workers, which is repugnant to a free and democratic society.”

That “anarcho”-capitalism wants to keep such a relationship (in which, to use Proudhon’s words, employees are “subordinated, exploited” and their “permanent condition is one of obedience” subject to the “sovereign power” of their master) proves beyond doubt that they are not anarchists nor interested in freedom. The choice ahead of us is to learn the mistakes of the past and to ensure we do not repeat them. And that means an honest and objective evaluation of the Spanish Revolution, an evaluation that Caplan does not (and probably cannot) provide.

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