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Review: Individualism versus Egoism

Anarcho

January 17, 2015

Individualist anarchism has always been very much a minority within the anarchist movement and given some of its advocates, you can understand why. However, it is always good to see material from the past made available to modern day radicals simply in order to allow people to judge for themselves.

So the publication of both *Individualist Anarchism Revolutionary Sexualism: Writings by Émile Armand* (Pallaksch Press, Austin, Texas, 2012) and *Stirner's Critics* (LBC Books and CAL Press, Berkeley/Oakland, 2012) is to be welcomed. Both books, like both writers, are very different. The Armand book is tiny both in size and writings, with 13 short articles collected for the first time and split roughly evenly into anarchism and sexuality. *Stirner's Critics*, in contrast, is more substantial and as well as complete new translations by Wolfi Landstreicher of two important texts by Stirner, also has a lengthy and important introduction ("Clarifying the Unique and Its Self-Creation") by Jason McQuinn. Making these works available fills a big hole in our understanding of Stirner which previous partial trans-

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lations (Daniel Guérin's *No Gods, No Masters*) have only indicated.

Émile Armand (1872–1963) was one of the leading French Individualist Anarchists of the early-to-mid 20th century. He wrote for and edited the anarchist publications *L'Ère nouvelle* (1901–1911), *L'EnDehors* (1922–1939) and *L'Unique* (1945–1953). As such, editor A. de Acosta should be congratulated in making his writings more accessible even if it is, I am afraid, a case of learning from previous mistakes in order to avoid certain dead-ends.

First, I need to be clear because individualist anarchism is not a unified theory of works (as would be expected it reflects the individual perspectives of each author). The American forms of it (most associated with Benjamin Tucker) are somewhat different to the European kind, although as I note in section G of *An Anarchist FAQ* other American individualists are closer to the European individualists (and so the anarchist mainstream) than others. This is best seen by their opposition to wage-labour *as such* rather than embrace Tucker's hope for a non-exploitative form it and so they are *consistent* anarchists and follow through their ideas to recognise that wage-labour violates both their opposition to rule (*archy*) and views on property (limited to possession).

This is shown when Armand writes that the “anarchist wishes to live without gods or masters; without bosses or directors” (11) and is “against the exploitation of the individual” (9). They oppose “exploitation” (to “make [others] labour on his account and for his profit”) and “monopolisation” (“possessing more than is necessary for its normal upkeep”) (14) and are against communism because “the individual would be as subordinate as he is presently” but “instead of being under the thumb of the small capitalist minority... he would be dominated by the whole of the economy. Nothing would properly belong to him.” (13)

So Armand, rightly, lists wage-labour – having bosses – as a form of oppression and exploitation which individualist anarchism is against. Yet this highlights a key problem with the theory because modern economies are based on workplaces which, in the main, have to be run by a group of workers. However, property is considered by Armand to be a key feature of individualist anarchism – a source of independence and autonomy for the individual. So we have a contradiction – if the means of production are owned by individuals then how are these to be managed? If it is by the owner and it needs a group to operate then we have wage-labour – and so exploitation and oppression. If it is by the workers jointly then we have socialisation – and so no private property.

Armand resolves this contradiction by getting rid of any form of workplace which needs more than a few people to operate:

“property in the means of production and the free disposition of products [are] essential guarantees of the person. It is understood that this property is limited by the possibility of putting to work (individually, by couples, by familial groups) the expanse of soil or the engines of production required to meet the necessities of the social unit; with the condition that the possessor not rent it to anyone or turn to someone in his service to put it into use.”
(14)

This is no solution at all but it does go to the heart of the problems with individualist anarchism. Yet it is hardly a new problem as it was highlighted by Proudhon in the 1840s and his solution is the basis for all forms of social anarchism – socialisation of the means of production based on workers’ associations. Thus, to quote Proudhon, the “organisation of labour, which involves the negation of political economy and the end

of property he who participates in [a workplace] must do so... as an active factor... [and] have a deliberative voice in the council... regulated in accordance with equality” for “all accumulated capital being social property, no one can be its exclusive proprietor.” This federated and self-managed economy was the basis on which disagreements within social anarchism – over, for example, tactics (reform or revolution) or goals (distribution of goods by deed or by need) – were played out.

So if Armand’s vision of a free economy is problematic to say the least, what of his tactics?

He writes of “struggle in all places for complete expression of thought... for absolute liberty of association... and secession. We are for the intangible freedom of exposition, publicity, experiment, and realisation.” (9) The individualist anarchist is “always asocial, insubordinate, an outsider, marginal, an exception, a misfit” (11) and are “enemies of the State and all its institutions... There is no possibility of conciliation between the anarchist and any form whatever of society resting on authority”. (11–2) This means “an abyss separates anarchism from all forms of socialism, including syndicalism.” (13)

Yet the promise of individualist anarchism – a conscious rebellion against every form of tyranny – becomes, in practice, quietism of epic proportions. This can be seen from Armand’s texts – what is the most revolutionary act the individual can do? Is it to down-tools in a strike against your economic tyrant, the capitalist? No. Is it to rise-up in revolt against your political tyrant, the state? No. It is to take off your clothes: “revolutionary nudism” for the “rulers know” that little “would be left of their prestige, of the authority delegated to them” if everyone was naked. (126–7) Indeed, nudism is ultra-revolutionary, revolutionary multiple times more than mere strikes, revolts or insurrections: “in a triple sense: affirmation, protest, liberation.” (125) Action which would actually challenge the state or capital – mass revolt – is dismissed:

to which real people will be sacrificed just as surely as we are now to the altar of the profit and power of the few).

Given that I have quoted *The Ego and Its Own*, I must note that the translator indicates (48) that he is working on a new English translation of it under the more accurate title of *The Unique and Its Property*. This is something to look forward to.

To conclude: while Armand’s individualism does not get us very far, Stirner’s points to why we are (libertarian) communists. We reject the narrow individualism of capitalism to create a world where we can develop and express our individuality to the full. Stirner reminds us that slaving away following orders to enriching the few is hardly in our interests. He reminds us that freedom is for real, concrete individuals rather than abstractions like “society”, “the proletariat”, etc. He reminds us that self-sacrifice as the basis of socialism is neither appealing nor viable, that pleasure has to be its basis: we *exist* when we should be *living*.

Life is short. Let us unite and make our fleeting time on this planet something to *enjoy* rather than survive.

labours. The latter are labours of a unique person, which only he is competent to achieve." So "for whom is time to be gained [by association]? For what does man require more time than is necessary to refresh his wearied powers of labour? Here Communism is silent." He then answers his own question: "To take comfort in himself as unique, after he has done his part as man!" (*The Ego and Its Own*, 268–9)

Yet if the authoritarian communists of his time were "silent", as Kropotkin stressed in *The Conquest of Bread*, we libertarian communists "recognise that man has other needs besides food, and as the strength of Anarchy lies precisely in that it understands *all* human faculties and *all* passions, and ignores none, we shall... contrive to satisfy all his intellectual and artistic needs... the man who will have done the four or five hours of... work [a day] that are necessary for his existence, will have before him five or six hours which his will seek to employ according to tastes... to satisfy his artistic or scientific needs, or his hobbies."

Egoism finds itself best defended under (libertarian) communism. After all, how do the Randroid egotists envision socialism other than the generalisation of wage-labour – us all being faceless parts of a big machine. Sadly, that vision can be found in Lenin's *State and Revolution* with its call for the "whole of society" to become "a *single* office and a *single* factory": "organise the *whole* economy on the lines of the postal service" for it is "an example of the socialist economic system". While unaware of the expression "going postal" he was aware of Engels' "On Authority" and, without thinking through to the very obvious implications, quotes it approvingly. This is unsurprising as he – like Engels and O'Rourke – won't be the ones to "Leave, ye that enter in, all autonomy behind!"

State capitalism has been confused with socialism for far too long and Stirner helps us to remember what the point of our activism is – *self-liberation*, not changing masters (even if that master is proclaimed to be "society" or some-such abstraction

"as before the war, we remain the resolute adversaries of revolutionary or insurrectionary attempts... [This is] no chance of success; it would result in a [bloody] repression... it would give the authorities an occasion to silence permanently those rare spirits who have known how to resist the general disorder" (29–30)

Which leaves criticism: "*The individualist anarchist critiques to free themselves and others.*" (37) With enemies like this, neither the state nor capital needs friends.

While Victor Serge traded in (elitist) individualism anarchism for (elitist) Bolshevism – one of those "misled by the dialectics of the fossils of the International" (32) – and is not the most reliable of memoirists, he was right to summarise his individualist phase in *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* as having "adopted what was (at that moment) the extremist variety [of anarchism], which by vigorous dialectic had succeeded, through the logic of its revolutionism, in discarding the necessity for revolution."

There is, however, an element of truth in Armand's works – we do need to transform how we live our lives now. Every anarchist is – or needs to be – a "lifestylist" anarchist. An anarchist who does not apply their ideas in practice is not much of an anarchist (for example, some male anarchists combine a theoretical commitment to gender equality with sexist attitudes and practices). Yet we must never forget that this lifestyle transformation, while necessary, is not sufficient.

So Armand was right to argue that there "are only masters because there are slaves" (13) and rail against hypocrisy, the "race for appearances" (21), which lead radicals to say one thing while doing the opposite, but his politics rejected the means by which people can change themselves while changing society – the class struggle, the encouraging of the revolt and self-organisation of the masses against their oppressors. Instead he

proclaims “[w]e have not criticised vehemently enough the enrolment in leagues, unions, syndicates, and other bodies where individual autonomy and initiative are sacrificed to the common weal.” (30) In reality, we express our individuality best when we unite with our equals to defend our common interests and, in so doing, be in a position to replace hierarchical organisations with self-managed ones.

Finally, half the book is made up of Armand’s writings of “revolutionary sexuality” and it is hard not to agree with the editor when he notes that in these texts Armand “ended up simply narrating his own fantasies and obsessions and presenting them, even if only by implication, as a quasi-program”. (116–7) Ultimately, it is hard to take seriously someone who proclaims *birth* “the most authoritarian gesture” as it is “throwing a being that did not ask to be brought into the world into the hell of archist and cratic society” (99) and Armand’s anarchist writings, sadly, give you no real reason to do so.

So Armand’s individualism takes us nowhere, does Stirner’s egoism have anything to say of interest to class struggle anarchists?

Max Stirner (1806–1856) is often considered – when not dismissed out of hand – as the black sheep amongst anarchist thinkers. Stirner, as is well known, did not call himself an anarchist and had no impact on the development of anarchism until his discovery by the movement in the 1890s (any influence was indirect via Marx and Engels whom he did influence, far more than Marxists like to admit). After his rediscovery, his ideas mostly influenced American individual circles, provoking a split within it between the egoists and natural rights advocates which accelerated its marginalisation. Emma Goldman was the only notable communist-anarchist to find him of interest. Should we join her?

For the working class syndicalists of my home city of Glasgow in the 1940s, the answer was a resounding yes – they combined Stirner with Kropotkin and took the former’s “Union of

shut out. Instead of owning the world, as he might, he does not own even the paltry point on which he turns around.” (*The Ego and Its Own*, 312, 248–9) While, like Proudhon, noting that communism in the authoritarian form it existed at the time could equally be oppressive to the individual as property, he was hardly supportive of capitalism:

“Restless acquisition does not let us take breath, take a calm *enjoyment*. We do not get the comfort of our possessions... Hence it is at any rate helpful that we come to an agreement about *human* labours that they may not, as under competition, claim all our time and toil.” (*The Ego and Its Own*, 268)

Competition “has a continued existence” because “all do not attend to *their affair* and come to an *understanding* with each other about it... Abolishing competition is not equivalent to favouring the guild. The difference is this: In the *guild* baking, etc., is the affair of the guild-brothers; in *competition*, the affair of chance competitors; in the *union*, of those who require baked goods, and therefore my affair, yours, the affair of neither guildic nor the concessionary baker, but the affair of the *united*.” (*The Ego and Its Own*, 275) He repeats this in “Stirner’s Critics” as it is clear some of his readers failed to understand his point.

And the point is that if we want socialism then it should be because it would achieve the task of producing (without bosses!) a standard of living to allow us the time and resources to express ourselves fully (Kropotkin makes the same point in “Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Its Ideal”). The “organisation of labour”, Stirner argues, “touches only such labours as others can do for us... the rest remain egoistic, because no one can in your stead elaborate your musical compositions, carry out your projects of painting, etc.; nobody can replace Raphael’s

Egoism is not against communism for surely workers will “give [competition] up because it doesn’t satisfy their egoism?” (79) What is best for us is determined by its utility and “what is most useful is open to argument. And now, sure enough, it turns out... that in competition, not everyone finds *his profit*, his desired ‘private advantage,’ his value, his actual interest. But this comes out only through egoistic or selfish calculations”. (79–80)

Socialism, then, has to be in our interests – which is hardly a problematic position to take if your life is primarily surviving in a system where you spend your time following the orders of the person who you are enriching by your labour. Why bother with struggle and revolution if it is not to make *your* life better? Better in *quality* – in terms of both living standards (which is possible within capitalism to some degree) and freedom (which is not).

Hence the need for the “union of egoists” to be taken literally – for in union there is strength and that works far better than appeals to “fairness” or the altruism of the few:

“Defend yourself, and no one will do anything to you! He who would break your will has to do with you, and is your enemy. Deal with him as such. If there stand behind you for your protection some millions more, then you are an imposing power and will have an easy victory.” (*The Ego and Its Own*, 197)

As “Stirner’s Critics” confirms, unlike in the hierarchy of wage-labour the egoist association is self-managed: “Only in the union can you assert yourself as unique, because the union does not possess you, but you possess it or make it of use to you.” Property, then, “deserves the attacks of the Communists and Proudhon: it is untenable, because the civic proprietor is in truth nothing but a propertyless man, one who is everywhere

Egoists” as “One Big Union”. The logic is simple – we look after our own self-interest best by uniting with our fellow workers to resist both state and capital (this, it must be stressed, can be found in Stirner’s *The Ego and Its Own* without difficulty). Max Baginski in *Mother Earth* (Vol. II, No. 3) also saw his benefit:

“It is because the individual does not own himself, and is not permitted to be his true self. He has become a mere market commodity, an instrument for the accumulation of property – for others... Individuality is stretched on the Procrustes bed of business... If our individuality were to be made the price of breathing, what ado there would be about the violence done to the personality! And yet our very right to food, drink and shelter is only too often conditioned upon our loss of individuality. These things are granted to the propertyless millions (and how scantily!) only in exchange for their individuality – they become the mere instruments of industry.”

Stirner’s *The Ego and Its Own* contains much to support a wider appreciation and, at its best, effectively shows how capitalism undermines rather than encourages individuality in multiple ways. As such, his work must not be lumped in – as both Marxists and proprietarians wish – with defenders of capitalism. Egoism has had a bad name due to it being associated with the likes of Ayn Rand and those who parrot her narrow, self-defeating egotism like the Randoids they are. The many are sacrificed to the few with the sacredness of property being the means to fool the former into working for the latter. This is not Stirner’s position.

As such, the publication of *Stirner’s Critics* is to be welcomed as it challenges this narrow interpretation of his work. The book contains an excellent introduction by Jason McQuinn,

useful notes by the translator as well as two works by Stirner: “Stirner’s Critics” and “The Philosophical Reactionaries”. I will concentrate on the former as I found it the more interesting.

As may be expected from its title, Stirner replies to his critics – by pointing out the obvious. Egoism “is not opposed to love nor to thought; it is no enemy of the sweet life of love, nor of devotion and sacrifice; it is no enemy of intimate warmth, but it is also no enemy of critique, nor of socialism, nor, in short, of any *actual interest*... It is directed against only disinterestedness and the uninteresting; not against love, but against sacred love... not against socialists, but against sacred socialists, etc.” (81–2) The person “who loves a human being is richer, thanks to this love, than another who doesn’t love anyone” (81) and so the egoist aims not at “isolation, separation, loneliness” but rather the “full *participation* in the interesting by – exclusion of the uninteresting.” (82)

This is important – capitalist egotism reduces the many to commodities, people (unique individuals) to “labour” and “human resources”. The wage-worker does not participate fully in the workplace because we toil under the orders of the few to enrich them. The nature of the capitalist “association” is far from the participation which is Stirner’s goal and while neo-classical economics and propertarians wish to turn every interaction into a market exchange (and re-educate us into accepting this degradation). His egoistic associations are far more – *human*. Children creating “a playful egoistic association”, lovers meeting “together to delight (enjoy) each other” and friends meeting to go “to a tavern for wine”. (100) He makes the obvious point which the egotists of capitalism avoid:

“But is an association in which most of those involved are hoodwinked about their most natural and obvious interests, an association of egoists? Have ‘egoists’ come together where one is the slave or serf of the other?” (99)

P.J. O’Rourke, for example, in *On The Wealth of Nations* quotes Adam Smith against “socialism”: “Nothing can be more absurd, however, than to imagine that men in general should work less when they work for themselves, than when they work for other people.” Yet capitalism is based on wage-labour, working for the property-owner having “sold their arms and parted with their liberty” (to use Proudhon’s words). As Smith was well aware:

“Masters of all sorts, therefore, frequently make better bargains with their servants in dear than in cheap years, and find them more humble and dependent in the former than in the latter... Nothing can be more absurd, however, than to imagine that men in general should work less when they work for themselves, than when they work for other people. A poor independent workman will generally be more industrious than even a journeyman who works by the piece. The one enjoys the whole produce of his own industry; the other shares it with his master.”

Our propertarian thinks working for “man” (society) is untenable while working for “the man” (boss) is equivalent to working for yourself. Unlike Smith, he forgets the grim reality of wage-labour and in the process exposes an inability to comprehend his favoured writer in a way beyond satire. Stirner would be impressed, though, by his unwillingness to consider accuracy as a “spook” to be worshiped as a sacred thing but not with how it is being used: Stirner refused to consider as “associations of egoists” those “societies in which the needs of some get satisfied at the expense of others... in which... some can satisfy their need for rest only by making others work until they are exhausted... lead comfortable lives by making others live miserably or even starve... live the high life because others are so addle-brained as to live in want”. (99)