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What is Individualist Anarchism?

Daniel Burton

Saturday, December 7th, 2002

The name “individualist anarchism,” since the mid-19th Century has stood for a movement that has been anti-authoritarian, pro-worker, and anti-collectivist. Traditionally, individualist anarchism has considered itself part of the fold of left-anarchism (though not social anarchism), a broader movement that opposes both capitalism and the state, which it sees as dual forces of oppression. Individualist anarchism, however, has always held far more positive views towards private property than any other part of the left, embracing the market economy, though not embracing full-blown capitalism.

Individualist anarchism has held a unique position in being both egalitarian and anti-collectivist. Rather than collectivizing economic resources and making people dependent on the collective, it has sought to empower the poor and working class by making them property owners, and making property ownership widespread enough that everyone can participate in a market economy without being subservient to others. The ultimate goal is an economy in which individuals have ultimate autonomy, working with resources that they themselves own,

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individually or as voluntary associations, in which economic and political power is distributed equally enough that no one holds authority over others.

Individualist anarchists have always had a keen interest in market economics, however, and have recognized the limits of egalitarian reforms. Keeping an eye on the goal, not of ultimate equality, but of autonomy, they have focused on such things as more equal access to land, easing the restrictions of patents and copyrights, and breaking the government's monopoly on money as ways of improving the lot of the poor. The challenge for individualist anarchists is coming up with a system of individual rights that has the optimal balance of equality and private property to empower workers as the autonomous masters of their own future. This has led to a lot of complex decisions and comprises most of the subject of disagreements among individualist anarchists.

Perhaps one of the newest challenges, to which individualist anarchism has yet to formulate a complete response, is environmental issues. On this, and many other issues, it has remained a dual current submerged on the one hand in the broader anarchist movement, and on the other hand in free-market circles. One of the reasons I am creating this site is to give it once more an independent voice.

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