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Review: Anarchist Economics

Anarchist Economics: An Alternative for a World in Crisis – The
Economics of the Spanish Libertarian Collectives 1936–39 by
Abraham Guillen (distributed by AK Press)

2002

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**Anarchist Economics: An Alternative for a World in
Crisis – The Economics of the Spanish Libertarian
Collectives 1936–39 by Abraham Guillen (distributed
by AK Press)**

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This pamphlet adds another volume to the bulging library of anarchist publications which regard the setting up of the workers' and peasants' collectives at the start of the Spanish civil war in 1936 as "one of the most, if not the most, extensive and profound revolutions ever seen".

Abraham Guillen's argument is that the Spanish collectives can serve as the model for a revolutionary alternative to both Western-style capitalism and Eastern-bloc 'communism'. But Guillen picks out from the Spanish events some of the most negative features of that experience, so that in the end his "alternative for a world in crisis" amounts to nothing more than a variation on the same lousy old capitalist theme.

Basically, Guillen promotes a vision of relatively autonomous and self-sufficient communes joined together by market relations (i.e. buying/selling or barter).

On the distribution of goods within each collective he mentions that some of the Spanish collectives “freely distributed among the collectivist landworkers that which was abundant but rationed that which was scarce”.

This seems to us a reasonable way of tackling the problem of material scarcity which may very well temporarily confront us when capitalism is being overthrown, so long as any rationing system is based on the principle, ‘to each according to their needs’.

Guillen however proposes that each person’s consumption would be regulated “in accordance with quality and quantity of work done”, with “production cards”, on which “the value of work done by days is recorded”, being used as a kind of “credit card” or form of money.

The adoption of this principle, ‘to each according to their work’, would amount to the re-introduction (or rather continuation) of the wage system. And indeed to the extent that similar schemes were actually put into operation in Spain (there were numerous variations on the production card theme and hundreds of different local currencies) the overall thrust of the collectivization movement was towards the retention of essentially capitalist relations rather than in the direction of socialism/communism.

This can be seen even more clearly in the relations between collectives. As very few collectives were self-sufficient, central warehouses were set up where collectives exchanged their surplus produce among themselves for the goods they lacked. Here hard cash was often dispensed with, but the relative proportions in which the goods were bartered with were still determined by monetary values – for example how many sacks of flour a collective could obtain in exchange for a ton of potatoes was worked out by calculating the value of both in monetary terms – and no collective was allowed to withdraw a sum of goods worth more than those it had deposited.

Guillen wholeheartedly supports this system, describing approvingly how “if local products could not satisfy the consumer, the

collective, through its council or appropriate section, obtained, on an equal exchange basis, the goods and services needed”, and how “a self-managed system was thus formed, where goods, products and services were exchanged according to their real work-value relationship”.

He fails to comprehend how rapidly this system of relations among the collectives would lead to the main purpose of production becoming (or remaining) for exchange via the market rather than to directly meet people’s needs. And, once again, insofar as this is what did actually happen in Spain, the collectivization movement’s development was driven basically by capitalist dynamics.

Had the Spanish collectives been moving in a genuinely communist direction the tendency towards self-sufficiency and autonomy for each collective (which Guillen elevates to the level of a “biological principle”) would have been reversed in favor of centralized planning by delegate bodies. The wealth produced by each collective would not be regarded as its own private property. Instead, in relations among the collectives the same attitude would prevail as existed within each collective: “The concept ‘yours and mine’ will no longer exist...Everything will belong to everyone.” The role of the central planning bodies would essentially be simple technical ones, such as finding out what goods were needed where and arranging their transportation from one place to another.

In Guillen’s model there is central co-ordination but it is co-ordination of exchange relationships. Throughout the pamphlet great stress is laid on forms of organization — direct democracy, federation, self-management, and so on — but the content of these organizational forms remains in essence a market economy.

To sum up, the “anarchist economics” Guillen supports is simply the dead-end of self-managed capitalism, which is every bit as reactionary as private or state capitalism. The communist society we are fighting for can only be established by the complete destruction

of ALL private property, money, wages and markets — whatever their form.