



ANARCHY VERSUS ANARCHO- CAPITALISM

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In the January 15th 1983 issue (No. 1, Volume 44) of *Freedom*, the anarchist fortnightly magazine, the anonymous author of the front page article “Silent too long” says some gratifyingly venomous things about the Libertarian Alliance. I have yet to meet a propagandist who prefers being ignored to being criticised, so presumably the people who write *Freedom* will be no more distressed by this reply to their article than I and my LA friends were by the article itself. At least we’re taking each other seriously.

The *Freedom* writer regrets the lengthening list of duties, often conflicting, which the word “anarchism” is now recruited to perform, especially in its hyphenated “anarcho-” version. “A quick glance at recent anarchist publications” he writes:

“reveals a bewildering array of variations. Anarcho-christians, anarcho-individualists, anarcho-pacifists, anarcho-syndicalists, anarcho-pagans, anarcho-feminists, anarcho-communists, even the altogether insulting claim of the Libertarian Alliance to being ‘anarcho-capitalists’!”

We have the same problem with the word “libertarian”. Recently, for example, I saw it used to describe a less than completely disgusting member of the Soviet Politburo, and it is constantly used by members of the Liberal and Social Democratic Parties to signify their hypothetical reluctance to use to the full whatever new powers of state repression they are, in the same breath, recommending.

The Libertarian Alliance is not “anarcho-capitalists!”. It is an alliance of limited state liberals, anarcho-capitalists and other free market advocates.

I’m unlikely to convince any anarchist who regards the very idea of anarcho-capitalism as an outrage (“The total contradiction ... is self-evident.”) that it is anything else, and I’m not going to try. But I do think the *Freedom* writer rather misrepresents our motives for using this phrase. He supposes that our purpose is to bask in the stolen glory of the “ortho-

dox” anarchist tradition. “The posers and ‘more radical than thou’ have drifted in and laid claim to our ideas and history and we remain silent.” “Anarcho” does indeed suggest radicalism, but in our case this is no pose, even if we aren’t the kind of radicals *Freedom* approves of. Many of us do indeed claim as our own *some* of the anarchist literature, but this isn’t theft. We agree with it. What we disagree with we criticise.

The *Freedom* writer, on the other hand, laments that anarchists of his sort have *not* criticised anarcho-capitalism, but instead have connived at the despicable anarcho-capitalist subterfuge by supplying anarchist publications to anarcho-capitalist bookshops like the one I work in. Constantly calling us “free market shits”, and even, on one occasion, publishing a letter from the person who urinated through our letter box and chucked a brick through our window hardly constitutes silence. But intelligent arguments in *Freedom* against anarcho-capitalism have indeed been rare. Whether *Freedom* contains such arguments in the future or not, I hope its publishers continue to supply it to my bookshop.

But there is more at stake here than radical chic, useful though this is for propaganda purposes (and hence infuriating to our opponents). Issues of substance are involved, not just labels.

ANARCHY, STATE AND PROPERTY

I believe in capitalism. But, aside from my meagre savings, I am not “a capitalist”, merely one of capitalism’s many fortunate hirelings. To be a capitalist means to possess and control an abundance of capital rather than to hold any definite opinions about how capitalists ought to behave, or be made to behave. Capitalists invest much time, money and effort learning the particular circumstances of their trade, and if these circumstances change dramatically, whether towards anarcho-capitalism or in any other direction, a lot of this investment will be wasted. Most capitalists are therefore strongly in favour of existing state repressions, hardly any oppose state repression on principle, and none do so out of straightforward self interest, except insofar as, like me, they specialise in the trade of anarcho-capitalism. (Other capitalists specialise in the trade of anti-capitalism.)

Anarcho-capitalists unite with other anarchists in condemning the state, but differ completely from most anarchists in that they believe in property.

Most anarchists regard property rights as just another example of the unjust domination of man by man, and the state as all the more monstrous for upholding such rights.

Anarcho-capitalists regard property as the indispensable *solution* to problems all of which are worth solving and at least some of which must be solved if civilisation is not to collapse utterly. But we regard free people as quite capable of upholding their own property rights, singly or in cooperation. State officials only get in the way, by nationalising the business of solving property disputes, by defining property rights very badly and weakly, and by simply thieving from those whose property they claim to protect.

Civilisation means people *doing* things *to* things, and a civilised activity of any complexity usually involves having a fixed place set aside for that purpose. But suppose, as happens all the time, civilised people *disagree* about the use to which a particular patch of ground, load of granite, tube of paint or stick of dynamite should be put. A manuscript can-

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Political Notes No. 4

ISSN 0267-7059 ISBN 0948317 32 9

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

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not be inscribed if argument continuously and violently rages about whether this is what the parchment being used by the scribe ought to be used for in the first place. A patch of land cannot simultaneously be used for a field of corn, a football pitch and a brewery.

SCARCITY

The underlying problem to which property is the solution is that of scarcity. Electrical energy, cars and egg whisks are becoming more common by the month, and one day the question of who may use which car may no longer be a matter for debate, since there are enough cars for all. But meanwhile cars remain somewhat scarce, and other items are becoming more scarce, such as deserted beaches on the south coast of France, country views unencumbered by human habitation within twenty miles of a capital city, and authentic Hawker Hurricane aeroplanes in good running order.

The above truths are quite separate from any questions concerning profit, that is, concerning the purposes to which all these scarce things are to be put. Two adjacent and quarrelling property developers both in it for the money must, if they are to be successful, agree who has which property. But exactly the same applies to churches, communes, regional subcommittees of the Committee for National Salvation, less than supreme soviets, and so on. Organisations impeccably free from any lustful concern to further their own interests or feather their own nests, devoted only to the greater good of society or the will of Allah, will still argue about the allocation of resources. Does the greater good of society require this group to build the child's play centre they propose, or that group to build the power station to make the electricity that all agree is needed? Insofar as any settlements to such debates are established, whether by democratic assemblies, priests, revered tribal chieftains or hated foreign conquerors, then property rights are established with them, and those who acquire these property rights can then pursue their desired projects with some confidence.

THE ANARCHIST HOLOCAUST

Some anarchists claim that it is the other way round, that it is the society founded on property that has caused all the scarcities. This is not wholly untrue. Things do have to be owned before they can be developed and the resulting development has abolished some scarcities, but it has indeed created others. By destroying all institutions based on any kind of property rights, and thus also destroying the overwhelming majority of mankind who are now sustained by these institutions, many kinds of property rights could indeed be dispensed with, most notably in land. The surviving remnant of mankind could roam as nomads. (They would still, I think, insist on owning their spears.) Some anarchists do not realise that this is the inevitable consequence of the ideas they propose. These people are, to put it with extreme politeness, monstrously stupid. Others want just such a holocaust, and about people like this it is hard to be so polite.

By far the greatest merit of the idea that property should be abolished is that as soon as anyone is stupid enough to try applying it the disastrous consequences immediately become obvious to all who survive, and property rights are hurriedly reestablished. Unless there is a major nuclear war there is not the speck of a chance that civilisation actually will collapse. This is just another way of saying that the idea of abolishing property will continue, in practice if not in lumen-intellectual theory, to be almost completely ignored.

PROPERTY HELPS THE PROPERTYLESS AS WELL AS THE PROPETIED

Most anarcho-capitalists are in favour of civilisation, want more of it, and therefore urge the use of property rights to settle many problems not now solved by such means. We believe that the following should be chopped up into privately owned bits: the electromagnetic spectrum (now woefully under-exploited), the sea (both surface and seabed), and the roads (universally assumed to be chaotic beyond redemption). The widely advertised problem of *pollution* is, we believe, the result of property rights *not* being enforced as they should be.

It is widely assumed that property only benefits those who possess it, but this isn't so. If I am buying a product I want lots of suppliers to choose between. If I'm seeking work, I benefit hugely from having lots of bosses to choose between, who must then compete for my services. Such circumstances cannot occur without property rights to separate from each other the various organisations involved.

But what is this talk of "bosses" and "organisations", upon whom I contemplate bestowing my "services"? "A basic tenet of anarchism" says the *Freedom* writer "is the *absolute* (his emphasis) rejection of all forms of authority." Well, if opinion solidifies into that shape, I'm not any kind of anarchist. So be it.

BAKUNIN NOT ANARCHIST SHOCK

But neither was the author of the following:

"Does it follow that I reject all authority? Far from me such a thought. In the matter of boots, I refer to the authority of the bootmaker; concerning houses, canals, or railroads, I consult that of the architect or the engineer. For such or such special knowledge I apply to such or such a *savant*. But I allow neither the bootmaker nor the architect nor the *savant* to impose his authority upon me."

Thus wrote Michael Bakunin. His rejection of coercively imposed authority is absolute, but not his rejection of authority as such.

Also not an anarchist, according to *Freedom*, is the author of this:

"We want to print articles that enlighten and educate. Articles that reveal the shoddy natures of the pseudo-revolutionaries, that show the corrupt folly of the authoritarian left, right and centre. We can not do this alone. If you also want a paper that does all of the above, and more, then *you* (in italics in the original) are going to have to help. Don't worry if you feel you can't write well, just send us the facts and we can write it. Without the information we can write and print nothing."

This piece of writing appears on the same front page of *Freedom* as the piece denouncing anarcho-capitalism. It is as fine an example as you could hope to observe of an attempt to exercise *non-coercive authority*, the sort that anarcho-capitalists favour. Lord Kitchener himself (he of the World War I recruiting poster) could not have put the point better.

It seems that it is not even possible to put together a satisfactory anarchist fortnightly magazine without overturning a basic tenet of the creed it exists to proclaim.