

non serviam #6

Contents: Editor's Word
Ken Knudson: A Critique of Communism
and The Individualist Alternative (serial: 6)

Editor's Word

There are three main proponents of egoism known today, Max Stirner, Friedrich Nietzsche and Ayn Rand. Each of them has a very distinct approach to egoism. While Rand has a very conceptual approach, asking "who is the right beneficiary of a man's action" [1], Stirner takes an almost opposite path, rejecting any "justification" outside himself, in that the root of his egoism is to find in the *einzig* - the unique, individual person. Nietzsche speaks about a "will to power" of a thousand little emotional sub-selves that make out the total self, while for Rand the self is the mind –the intellect– alone. Stirner is close to the existentialist camp in his focus on the unique choice, by his focus on the "creative nothing" which creates itself, while Nietzsche, who believed himself to descend from Polish nobility, emphasizes "fate" [*amor fati*] and belonging to the blood one is born into.

So, we see there are more than enough choices of ones "egoism". Instead of embracing one alternative and denouncing the other two as the false –and possibly even evil– egoisms, I will try to explain in general outlines¹ why I have chosen to emphasize one of them - namely Stirner's.

¹ The field is now open: Anyone wanting to express their unique path to egoism and why it has taken the form it has is invited to write such an article. If you want, make it an autobiography. Myself, I plan a more

Stirner is often described as a nominalist, one to whom concepts and/or universals have no meaning outside groupings made by observers. I have an opposite opinion on that: For Stirner, the road to egoism is seen as going through Idealism, not outside. He recognizes ideals and thoughts, only does not - surrender to them. Stirner's "anti-conceptualism" is to be found late in his book: "The conceptual question 'what is man?' - has then changed into the personal question 'who is man?' With 'what' the concept was sought for, in order to realize it; with 'who' it is no longer any question at all, but the answer is personally on hand at once in the asker: the question answers itself." "... no *concept* expresses me, nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me; they are only names." This is his insistence on his uniqueness as an individual. An insistence not found equally strong by Nietzsche or by Rand. Where the latter focusses strongly on abstract "Man",² whose moral characteristics follow from the possession of reason, the former at times³ goes as far as negating the individual in his quest for the "Übermensch", the super-man, which is supposed to fulfill some longing to go beyond oneself and beyond the transitory stage of Man: [2] Man is but a rope over the abyss between the animal and the Übermensch.

So, Stirner is unique in his emphasis on uniqueness. This is the central element in

comprehensive article later. This was a start.

² There is an open question of whether, and if so to which degree, Stirner's criticism of Feuerbach's "Man" is applicable to Rand's concept of "Man" as in "qua man". Perhaps subject for a later article.

³ Nietzsche is no systematic philosopher, and so one can find support both for and against egoism in his writing.

Stirner's thought - the first-person and particular viewpoint, the me-outlook, as opposed to the third-person and general viewpoint. The third-person, general viewpoint is for him justified only insofar as it is grounded in the me-outlook. "Away, then, with every cause that is not altogether my cause!"

Among the three, Stirner is the only one who makes no claim for anyone as to how

they should live, or what is suitable for their "kind", but leaves it totally to individual choice. This is why I prefer Stirner.

[1] The Ayn Rand Lexicon

[2] Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra".

A Critique of Communism and The Individualist Alternative

Ken Knudson

(serial: 6)

REVOLUTION:
THE ROAD TO FREEDOM?

*It's true that non-violence has been a
dismal failure. The only bigger failure
has been violence.*

—Joan Baez

There's an old story about a motorist who stopped a policeman in downtown Manhattan and asked him how he could get to the Brooklyn Bridge. The officer looked around, thought a minute, scratched his head and finally replied, "I'm sorry, but you can't get there from here. Some anarchists are now wondering if you can get to the free society from where we stand today. I must confess that I, too, harbour some doubts. But if there is a way, it is incumbent upon all who wish to find that way to carefully examine the important end-means problem.

"The end justifies the means." Few people would argue with this trite statement. Certainly all apologists of government must ultimately fall back on such reasoning to justify their large police forces and standing armies. Revolutionary anarchists must also rely on this argument to justify their authoritarian methods "just one more time", the revolution being for them "the unfreedom to end unfreedom." It seems that the only people who reject outright this article of faith are a handful of (mostly religious) pacifists. The question I'd like to consider here is not whether the end JUSTIFIES the means (because I, too, tend to feel that it does), but rather whether the end is AFFECTED by the means and, if so, to what extent.

That the end is affected by the means should be obvious. Whether I obtain your watch by swindling you, buying it from you, stealing it from you, or soliciting it as a gift from you makes the same watch "graft", "my property", "booty", or "a

donation." The same can be said for social change. Even so strong an advocate of violent revolution as Herbert Marcuse, in one of his rare lapses into sanity, realised this fact:

"Unless the revolution itself progresses through freedom, the need for domination and repression would be carried over into the new society and the fateful separation between the 'immediate' and the 'true' interest of the individuals would be almost inevitable; the individuals would become the objects of their own liberation, and freedom would be a matter of administration and decree. Progress would be progressive repression, and the 'delay' in freedom would threaten to become self-propelling and self-perpetuating." [56]

But despite the truth of Marcuse's observation, we still find many anarchists looking for a shortcut to freedom by means of violent revolution. The idea that anarchism can be inaugurated by violence is as fallacious as the idea that it can be sustained by violence. The best that can be said for violence is that it may, in rare circumstances, be used as an expedient to save us from extinction. But the individualist's rejection of violence (except in cases of self-defence) is not due to any lofty pacifist principles; it's a matter of pure pragmatism: we realise that violence just simply does not work.

The task of anarchism, as the individualist sees it, is not to destroy the state, but rather to destroy the MYTH of the state. Once people realise that they no longer need the state, it will –in the words of Frederick Engels– inevitably "wither away" ("Anti-Duehring", 1877) and be consigned to the "Museum of Antiquities, by the side of the spinning wheel and the bronze axe" ("Origin of the Family, Private Property

and the State", 1884). But unless anarchists can create a general and well-grounded disbelief in the state as an INSTITUTION, the existing state might be destroyed by violent revolution or it might fall through its own rottenness, but another would inevitably rise in its place. And why shouldn't it? As long as people believe the state to be necessary (even a "necessary evil", as Thomas Paine said), the state will always exist.

We have already seen how Kropotkin would usher in the millennium by the complete expropriation of all property. "We must see clearly in private property what it really is, a conscious or unconscious robbery of the substance of all, and seize it joyfully for the common benefit." [57] He cheerfully goes on to say, "The instinct of destruction, so natural and so just...will find ample room for satisfaction." [58] Kropotkin's modern-day heirs are no different. Noam Chomsky, writing in the "New York Review of Books" and reprinted in a recent issue of "Anarchy", applauds the heroism of the Paris Commune of 1871, mentioning only in passing that "the Commune, of course [!], was drowned in blood." [59] Later in the same article he writes, "What is far more important is that these ideas [direct workers' control] have been realised in spontaneous revolutionary action, for example in Germany and Italy after World War I and in Spain (specifically, industrial Barcelona) in 1936." [60] What Chomsky apparently finds relatively UNimportant are the million-odd corpses which were the direct result of these "spontaneous revolutionary actions." He also somehow manages to ignore the fact that the three countries he mentions –Germany, Italy and Spain– were without exception victims of fascism within a few years of these glorious revolutions. One doesn't need a great deal of insight to be able to draw a parallel between these "spontaneous" actions with

their reactionary aftermaths and the spontaneous "trashings" which are currently in fashion in the United States. But it seems the Weathermen really DO "need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." [61]

The question of how to attain the anarchist society has divided anarchists nearly as much as the question of what the anarchist society actually is. While Bakunin insisted on the necessity of "bloody revolutions" [62], Proudhon believed that violence was unnecessary - saying instead that "reason will serve us better." [63] The same discord was echoed on the other side of the Atlantic some decades later when, in the wake of the infamous Haymarket bombing, the issue of violence came to a head. Benjamin Tucker, writing in the columns of "Liberty", had this to say about accusations leveled against him by Johann Most, the communist-anarchist editor of "Freiheit":

"It makes very little difference to Herr Most what a man believes in economics. The test of fellowship with him lies in acceptance of dynamite as a cure-all. Though I should prove that my economic views, if realised, would turn our social system inside out, he would not therefore regard me as a revolutionist. He declares outright that I am no revolutionist, because the thought of the coming revolution (by dynamite, he means) makes my flesh creep. Well, I frankly confess that I take no pleasure in the thought of bloodshed and mutilation and death. At these things my feelings revolt. And if delight in them is a requisite of a revolutionist, then indeed I am no revolutionist. When revolutionist and cannibal become synonyms, count me out, if you please. But, though my feelings revolt, I am not mastered by them or made a coward by them. More than from dynamite and blood do I

shrink from the thought of a permanent system of society involving the slow starvation of the most industrious and deserving of its members. If I should ever become convinced that the policy of bloodshed is necessary to end our social system, the loudest of today's shriekers for blood would not surpass me in the stoicism with which I would face the inevitable. Indeed, a plumb-liner to the last, I am confident that under such circumstances many who now think me chicken-hearted would condemn the stony-heartedness with which I should favour the utter sacrifice of every feeling of pity to the necessities of the terroristic policy. Neither fear nor sentimentalism, then, dictates my opposition to forcible methods. Such being the case, how stupid, how unfair, in Herr Most, to picture me as crossing myself at the mention of the word revolution simply because I steadfastly act on my well-known belief that force cannot substitute truth for a lie in political economy!" [64]

It is this issue of economics which generally sorts anarchists into the violent and non-violent wings of anarchism. Individualists, by and large, are pacifists in practice (if not in theory), whereas the communists tend toward violent revolution.¹ Why is this so? One reason I think is that individualists are more concerned with changing the conditions which directly affect their lives than they are with reforming the whole world "for the good of all." The communists, on the

¹ There are exceptions of course. It is hard to imagine a more dedicated pacifist than Tolstoy, for example. On the other side of the coin is Stirner, who quotes with near relish the French Revolutionary slogan "the world will have no rest till the last king is hanged with the guts of the last priest." [65]

other hand, have a more evangelical spirit. Like all good missionaries, they are out to convert the unbeliever - whether he likes it or not. And inevitably this leads to violence. Another reason communists are more prone to violence than individualists can be found, I think, in looking at the nature of the force each is willing to use to secure and sustain his respective system. Individualists believe that the only justifiable force is force used in preventing invasion (i.e. defensive force). Communists, however, would compel the worker to pool his products with the products of others and forbid him to sell his labour or the products of his labour. To "compel" and "forbid" requires the use of offensive force. It is no wonder, then, that most communists advocate violence to achieve their objectives.

If freedom is really what we anarchists crack it up to be, it shouldn't be necessary to force it down the throat of anyone. What an absurdity! Even so superficial a writer as Agatha Christie recognised that "if it is not possible to go back [from freedom], or to choose to go back, then it is not freedom." [66] A. J. Muste used to say that "there is no way to peace - peace IS the way." The same thing is true about freedom: the only way to freedom is BY freedom. This statement is so nearly tautological that it should not need saying. The only way to realise anarchy is for a sufficient number of people to be convinced that their own interests demand it. Human society does not run on idealism - it runs on pragmatism. And unless people can be made to realise that anarchy actually works for THEIR benefit, it will remain what it is today: an idle pipe dream; "a nice theory, but unrealistic." It is the anarchist's job to convince people otherwise.

Herbert Spencer –the great evolutionist of whom Darwin said, "He is about a dozen

times my superior"– observed the following fact of nature:

"Metamorphosis is the universal law, exemplified throughout the Heavens and on the Earth: especially throughout the organic world; and above all in the animal division of it. No creature, save the simplest and most minute, commences its existence in a form like that which it eventually assumes; and in most cases the unlikeness is great - so great that kinship between the first and the last forms would be incredible were it not daily demonstrated in every poultry-yard and every garden. More than this is true. The changes of form are often several: each of them being an apparently complete transformation - egg, larva, pupa, imago, for example ... No one of them ends as it begins; and the difference between its original structure and its ultimate structure is such that, at the outset change of the one into the other would have seemed incredible." [67]

This universal law of metamorphosis holds not only for biology, but for society as well. Modern-day Christianity resembles the early Christian church about as much as a butterfly resembles a caterpillar. Thomas Jefferson would have been horrified if he could have foreseen the "government by the consent of the governed" which today is the hereditary heir of his Declaration of Independence. French revolutionaries took turns beheading one another until that great believer in "les droits de l'homme", Napoleon Bonaparte, came upon the scene to secure "liberte, egalite, fraternite" for all. And wasn't it comrade Stalin who in 1906 so confidently forecast the nature of the coming revolution?: "The dictatorship of the proletariat will be a dictatorship of the entire proletariat as a class over the bourgeoisie and not the domination of a few individuals over the proletariat." [68]

The examples of these ugly duckling stories in reverse are endless. For as Robert Burns wrote nearly two centuries ago [69]:

*The best laid schemes o' mice and men
Gang aft a-gley;
An' lea'e us nought but grief and pain
For promis'd joy.*

REFERENCES

- [56] Herbert Marcuse, "Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory" (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1967), p. 435. This quotation was taken from the supplementary chapter written in 1954. The original book was first published by Oxford University Press in 1941.
- [57] Kropotkin, *Paroles*, p. 341.
- [58] *Ibid.*, p. 342.
- [59] Noam Chomsky, "Notes on Anarchism," "Anarchy 116," October, 1970, p. 316.
- [60] *Ibid.*, p. 318.
- [61] Bob Dylan, "Subterranean Homesick Blues," 1965.
- [62] Eltzbacher, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
- [63] *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- [64] Benjamin R. Tucker, "Instead of a Book (By a Man Too Busy to Write One)" (New York: Benj. R. Tucker, 1897), p. 401. Reprinted from "Liberty," May 12, 1888.
- [65] Max Stirner (Johann Kaspar Schmidt), "The Ego and His Own: The Case of the Individual Against Authority," trans. Steven T. Byington (New York: Libertarian Book Club, 1963), p. 298. "Der Einzige und sein Eigentum" was written in 1844 and translated into English in 1907, when it was published in New York by Benj. Tucker.
- [66] Agatha Christie, "Destination Unknown" (London: Fontana Books), p. 98.
- [67] Spencer, *op. cit.*, pp. 323-4.
- [68] Stalin, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
- [69] Robert Burns, "To a Mouse," 1785, stanza 7.