

In Defense of Libertarian Communism

by Kerry Thornley

Originally published in *Strategy of the New Libertarian Alliance* #2, May Day 1982-3, with comments by Samuel Edward Konkin III at the end.

For many years I accepted without question the prevailing opinion on the libertarian right that communist anarchism is "anti-market," that it was espoused principally by people who objected unconsciously to the idea of having to work and that it preached excessive violence. During the summer of 1975 I read Alexander Berkman's *What Is Communist Anarchism?* and confirmed a suspicion I'd been nurturing since 1969 that the last two of these charges, at least, were wholly in error. Berkman, like his comrades Emma Goldman and Rudolph Rocker, held views similar to those developed by Peter Kropotkin - except that Berkman was exceptionally eloquent and quotable in his expressions of them, while at the same time confining himself in *What Is Communist Anarchism?* to simple, working-class language.

All during his brief, tragic life he worked incessantly and tirelessly in support of all revolutionaries - including, in the early stages, the Bolsheviks in Russia and, later, all the anarchist dissidents, including Stirnerites, in Lenin's prisons, without ever claiming to share the predominant views of either. Needless to say, his support for fellow communist anarchists was unstinting.

As for the notion that revolutionary communist anarchists are bloodthirsty individuals, it is adequately refuted in the chapter in *What Is Communist Anarchism?* on violence. Berkman compares the social revolution to a fragile flower that must be cultivated gently. Believing that some violence is necessary, he argues that it is like rolling up one's sleeves before beginning the actual work of revolution, asserting also that when great thinkers like Bakunin and Malatesta ranted about destruction they were referring to the destruction of institutions, not of human beings.

But the charges that libertarian communism ignores the laws of the free market do not simply result from ignorance of its doctrines, but comprise instead an intellectually formidable

position. In the first place, Berkman failed miserably to comprehend the significance of monetary mutualist ideas about central banking - blaming the warlike nature of capitalism upon the overproduction of goods and the consequent necessity to find new markets, unaware that in a free society stored overproduced goods could become a basis for mediums of exchange. Moreover, he failed to see that the prospect of war is needed by multinational banking corporations and failed to realize that credit monopolies such as central banks virtually thrive upon the misery and destruction that create debt.

Beyond that mistake, however, his thesis does not express an ignorance of free market principles, but instead depends upon a view of human nature that differs from that of most Conservatives and laissez-faire capitalists. Conservatives accept Original Sin and libertarian rightists assume that the laws which result from present economic values will always prevail, although those values result in turn from centuries of authoritarian conditioning.

As Hagbard Celine points out in the *Illuminatus!* Trilogy, left anarchists disagree with right anarchists only in their predictions as to how people will behave in a free market - the leftists believing that cooperation will take the place of competition, the rightists assuming that people will remain as competitive as ever. In other words, while authoritarian economics are proscriptive, libertarian economics are predictive - a realization which facilitates left-right unity among anarchists and libertarians.

Libertarians tend to agree with Marxists that economics usually determine politics, that economic forces are more basic to the structure of society - but neither seem to take into consideration how much prevailing human values determine human choices. An ignorant society composed of ignorant people will make foolish purchases and thereby become a market for junk merchandise and/or enormously destructive weaponry designed to wipe out foreign civilian populations instead of its own domestic and multinational oppressors.

Unfortunately, ignorance tends to feed on itself. Spencer thought universal literacy would culminate in the solution of all of most of society's problems, but as Aldous Huxley observed he did not anticipate that most people would opt to read trivia - escapist fiction, inaccurate propaganda, advertising, etc. - instead of consciousness-raising materials and scientific papers. When television was in its infancy all kinds of optimistic predictions were made that it would eliminate war by establishing global communication between people of all cultures!

Of course, the economic and political requirements of the *status quo* tend to reinforce precisely those values that will maintain the established order, so there is some validity in the Marxist view of economic necessity, but the Russian and Chinese experiments have shown that a political takeover of society aimed at changing economic conditions does not succeed in significantly altering the economic substructure or in transforming personal values - and all libertarians understand the reasons.

But if, by libertarian methods, authoritarian values and the ignorance that they require are at a future point in history eradicated, what then? Will communist anarchism remain an anti-market philosophy or will the so-called laws of the market, being nothing more than descriptions of observed human behavior, change in accord with a proliferation of economic choices that result from psychologically liberated and informed values?

Like most higher mammals, human beings are herd animals, or tribalists. But the theological conceit that they are not mammals at all, but creatures "a little lower than angels," causes them to behave in a way that alienates them not only from their own bodies, but also from their own emotional and social needs.

Imagine, as one example, belonging to a voluntary extended family of twenty-five individuals, children included, that lived in the same village neighborhood, labored in the same workplace, and enjoyed the same recreations together. Assume that these individuals had located one another through a computer matching service and that therefore their lifestyle values were very much alike. Such a group might be further bonded in multilateral marriages, or it might be monogamous and bonded vicariously in collective auto-erotic sharing, or it might be sexually monogamous but held together by strong religious convictions or non-mystical values. Would such a group necessarily function in a manner that was anti-market? Even if it was organized internally for the equal sharing of what it produced?

Contrary to popular belief, human beings *like* to work, as the biography of many a millionaire will attest. What makes labor alienating under present social conditions is that it is organized after the military model, wherein participants are told when to work and when not to work, how to dress and what relations to maintain on the job with their fellow workers. With such a distorted notion what is necessary to production it is no wonder that the average person suspects that if working conditions were controlled directly by the workers themselves

everyone would sluff off! Or that a few would work and all the others would sit back.

A peculiarity of my own background is that I come from a Mormon family, and from ages twelve to sixteen I was intensely active in the church. Mormons are famous for contributing untold hours of free labor to their church, and it works that way because, for them, work is a social occasion. As Alan Watts would say, they have managed to break down the dichotomy in their church activities between work and play.

That communist anarchists are by and large ignorant of free market principles is simply not true. For while their choices of words are different from those of the libertarian right and they therefore seldom use the term "free market," it can be seen from a close reading of either Peter Kropotkin or Alexander Berkman that they recognize, as one example among many, that economic values are subjective, although they did not know this would become known among Austrian capitalists as the "law of marginal utility." In keeping with their contrasting view of human nature, the anarchists use marginal utility concepts to justify equal rations, since subjective value also implies that it is impossible to ascribe an objective value to anyone's labor.

Evidence that the communist libertarian view of human nature tend to be the more correct one is contained in A.S. Neill's Summerhill, where it is observed that in an environment of complete freedom children tend to be self-regulating and to master their subjects in the absence of any immediate rewards for so doing. That the resentment generated by compulsory measures is also absent in such a milieu seems to go a long way to explain why bribery, or reward, also becomes unnecessary. Further evidence is to be found in abundance in the study of anthropology, the Hopi Indians being only one very conspicuous, very extreme example of how far cooperation can develop in the direction of eliminating competition without crippling productive activity.

A logical political compromise between communist anarchism and libertarian capitalism would seem to be individualist anarchism of the kind espoused by Josiah Warren and Benjamin Tucker - for it makes the least number of assumptions in either direction about human nature and developed from experience with both utopian communist communities and the laissez-faire capitalism of the last century.

Instead of making metaphysical assumptions about the nature of human beings in a free society, it asks: With people as they are how can we arrange social institutions to allow for the optimum in both individual choice and useful cooperation?

Once we construct our alternative institutions with that question in mind, generations of human beings will begin to grow up in genuine freedom - and no past or present communist anarchist or laissez-faire capitalist can predict with certainty what will happen after that, but it seems to me they should be able to agree that this is where to begin.

For libertarian capitalists that means becoming aware of communist anarchist doctrines, and realizing that they are based not so much on ignorance of economics as on unlimited optimism for the potential rationality of genuinely free people. ---KWT

Editorial Comments by Samuel Edward Konkin III

*We await discussion in **SNLA #3's** letter section. So that it will not be derailed from the central subject - relations between various Anarchists - let me quickly correct some minor points which are simply errors of presentation of the market-libertarian positions by Kerry.*

First, his use of "libertarian right" should be taken as specialized for this article, since it is inconsistent with Libertarian Left and Libertarian Right used in other N-NLA publications.

*Second, while the Libertarian Right (our sense) may assume "that the laws which result from present economic values will always prevail, although these values result in turn from centuries of authoritarian conditioning," the Libertarian Left (agorists) believe the operation of true economic laws are distorted and repressed by centuries of statism and will be unleashed after the abolition of the State. The basic agorist position could be crudely put, to use Thornley's terms, that many people will be freed to "become more competitive than ever." That is, they will become entrepreneurial and less drudge-like. The speculative agorist view that this author holds (see brief discussion with Rothbard in **SNLA #1** on the New Libertarian*

Manifesto) is that Labor will asymptotically be abolished, replaced by "smart" drudge devices, machines, production systems, and so on.

Nor is it just "popular belief" that is opposed to the one that "human beings like to work." Ludwig Von Mises takes it as an axiom of praxeology - and I agree. Of course, what is "work" is open to debate; I consider creative and artistic endeavors to be forms of entrepreneurialism and think most agorists have similar views.

The Mormonoid method of mixing subjective-reward play with work is in no way inconsistent with agoric activity. The "Law" of Subjective Value of Mises is not the same as that of Marginal Utility; fortunately, Thornley's arguments do not depend on that misidentification.

Finally, Thornley would be better off comparing, as I assume some are ready to write in challenges to this effect, "utopian communist communities" with "utopian" agorist communities (i.e., the Counter-Economy) rather than "laissez-faire capitalism of the last century" with which only the far right of Libertarianism can find any affinity with.

Let the letters come on, now! ---**SEK3**