

El Individualismo ecléctico

A review of *El anarquismo individualista en España (1923–1938)* by Xavier Diez

Iconoclasta for Creative Individualist Anarchism

01/27/2013

Xavier Diez. *El anarquismo individualista en España (1923–1938)*. Virus editorial. 2007

In this book, based on the author's Phd thesis in History, we find the following characterization of individualist anarchism. "Anarchism, even from a terrain strictly cultural and historiographical, is seen with prejudice and suspicion...If this happens with anarchism in general, ¿what can we expect when we investigate one of its minoritarian currents, which on the other hand attracts suspicion within a big part of libertarian militancy? Evidently this implies...to fall within the heterodoxy of heterodoxy." (Diez, 2007, pág. 13)

Hopefully readers of this article can see the complexity and diversity of Individualist anarchism as a whole beyond prejudice and ignorance. As this review is thought of for an anglo audience I think it is important to consider two characterizations of individualist anarchism (IA) which I will argue, precisely with this review, that are one the first case plainly bizarre and ignorant and in the second case reductionist mainly thought of from and for the so called "insurrectionist" and in some cases self-described "nihilist" sector of US anarchism. This first case is one in which we found IA mainly associated with a particular astute and misleading view propagated by the strange literature which in the US calls itself "anarcho-capitalist" which proceed to make the unsustainable claim that they are continuing the tradition of US IA as espoused by Benjamin Tucker, Josiah Warren and Lysander Spooner.

On recent US views on Individualist Anarchism

Even though all of these are anti-capitalist authors well accepted in anarchist historiography (Spooner even joined at some point the First International of Bakunin and Marx) nevertheless the US "anarcho"-capitalists achieved for some time to mislead the American anarchist milieu in thinking IA is reducible to "market anarchism". This is so true to the extent that the American "post-left" author Bob Black went to say that "In a more recent, still narrower sense, "individualism" designates those who combine rejection of government with espousal of an absolutely unlimited laissez-faire market system...Considerable contact with some of them over the years has persuaded me that most anarcho-capitalists are sincere in their anarchism, although I am as certain that anarcho-capitalism is self-contradictory" (Black, 1997) I will share, as very likely most of the anarchist movement, the view that "anarcho-capitalism" cannot be considered at all a part of the anarchist movement but a part of right wing neoliberal economics (VVAA, Section F – Is "anarcho"-capitalism a type of anarchism? at An anarchist FAQ).

On the other hand I will want to point out the recent reception in US anarchist circles of the recently translated texts by European individualist anarchists (EIA) such as Renzo Novatore and Emile Armand and of the related phenomenon of illegalism. Armand was more or less an anarcho-pacifist as well as the Spanish individualist anarchist Miguel Gimenez Igualada later in his life (in his youth he did engage in illegalist activity as Xavier Diez points out in his book) and more explicitly French individualist anarchists such as Andre Arru and Charles Auguste Bontemps were anarcho-pacifists. Also we must add the early IA influence of the American non-violent objector Henry David Thoreau which Diez reports became also influential in Spanish and French IA. Nevertheless within the US insurrectionist anarchist sector we have seen this ignored most likely out of ignorance (as I pointed out before the texts by EIA are still being translated into English), although we should not rule a case of this being on purpose, and so IA has almost been processed to appeal to the self-described “nihilist” and almost testosterone driven impulses of black blockers. This treatment of IA also exists in the insurrectionist sectors of Italian and Chilean anarchism which, unlike the US ones, have gone to revive propaganda by the deed based on bombings, or at least attempts of that, of perceived capitalist and state interests.

Eclecticismo teórico

In this second case IA very well can justify such actions and worldviews and the “violentist” sector of IA exists since at least the late XIX century French IA milieu (Parry, 1987). Nevertheless we get a more diverse and complex picture of IA from Xavier Diez’s book in which IA could include violent “nihilists” but just as well naturist nudists, alternative school experiments, infoshops or as they call them in Spanish anarchism “ateneos libertarios”, intentional community experiments, civil disobedience inspired by Leo Tolstoy and Thoreau, free love and “individualist” orgies and openly promiscuous lifestyles, birth control activism and sexual education, aesthetic bohemianism a la Oscar Wilde, atheist and anti-religious activism, Esperanto language advocacy, anarchist trekking and camping trips to the mountains, anti-war and anti-nationalist activism and in some cases even an exploration of esoteric spiritualist tendencies such as theosophy.

So in this case, even though I tend to sympathize more with Bob Black on the discussion he had with Murray Bookchin on IA and “lifestyle anarchism” I think Bookchin characterized IA more accurately than Black when he said that they “expressed their opposition in uniquely personal forms, especially in fiery tracts, outrageous behavior, and aberrant lifestyles in the cultural ghettos of fin de siècle New York, Paris, and London. As a credo, individualist anarchism remained largely a bohemian lifestyle, most conspicuous in its demands for sexual freedom (‘free love’) and enamored of innovations in art, behavior, and clothing.” (Bookchin, 1995) Of course he also associated it with illegalist violence and as such I think he did justice to the eclecticism of IA.

As far as Xavier Diez, he argues in his book the following. “Another of the constants of individualist thought is the use of the adjective eclectic, used profusely within the analyzed press, in a meaning synonymous of openness and as antinomy of hermetic, of dogmatic. From the point of view of a collaborator, who signs under the pseudonym of E. Libertad...every path, every Ideal, goes to a noble end if it is understood adequately. Every theory, every school wants to take man towards happiness. To respect this human base which exists in every belief...That is to BE ECLECTIC...This philosophy is the one that gives the individual the freedom of his rhythm; which according to Han Ryner, is the formula for freedom”. (Diez, 2007, pág. 196) From Stirner, for Diez this same attitude can be extracted if we consider that “every supreme truth, sacralized ideal or dogma will be, seen as an alienation...in this sense they end up dominating the will and conditioning the behavior of individual...In this sense, the derived attitude of this idea explains

the eclectic attitude, or the ethic relativism, and the aversion of individualist anarchists towards every dogma, prejudice or truth fundamentally established.” (Diez, 2007, pág. 38)

The insurrectionist sector of anarchism has emphasized criticism of organization of a permanent nature. This anti-organizationalist view did exist in Spanish IA but nevertheless the pluralism or eclecticismo of Spanish IA did motivate an attitude towards other tendencies within anarchism which led an individualist anarchist like J. Elizalde to enter the Iberian Anarchist Federation alongside anarcho-syndicalists and anarcho-communists. As such Diez reports on Elizalde that “this promise of anarchism, which as we have commented before is present within the founding nuclei of the IAF and goes to become during some months its secretary, will fall in misfortune in 1928 for his militant activity.” (Diez, 2007, pág. 97) As such Spanish IA did participate within the IAF and so “One of the most prominent groups, and which will be main impulse of the individualist magazine *Ética*, of Barcelona, will be the *Ateneo Naturista Éclectico*, which different sections, the most outstanding of which will be the trekking group *Sol y Vida*...they will participate in the establishment of the Iberian Anarchist Federation, in the Saler Beach, Valencia, in July 1927...The IAF itself will turn out to be an heterogeneous set of affinity groups, with different sensibilities...within the diverse anarchist tendencies an outstanding one will be that of the individualists, coming from the influence of groups like the previously cited *Sol y Vida*, represented by Elizalde, and others which will claim as legitimate the illegalist strategy, meaning, the conscious transgression of laws as formulas of social subversion.” (Diez, 2007, pág. 96)

All of these could very well find inspiration on Stirner. But Xavier Diez shows that Stirner was a main influence but much more influenced Spanish IA. So he goes to describe the main influences and their contents for this and we get in Diez’s words the following. Max Stirner’s “egocentric individualism destroyer of the Absolute”. Henry David Thoreau or “the hermit rebel”. Josiah Warren’s “disenchantment with the collective”. Benjamin Tucker’s “liberal individualism”. And French individualism in which he finds “Emile Armand and Han Ryner’s existential liberation”.

Another chapter of the book informs us on “theoretical supplements” in Spanish IA. Diez’s here deals with other theories which were influential within it. And before that we find important themes addressed within it. So we find that the Spanish individualist anarchists were deeply interested on issues such as the forms of anarchic association as informed by concepts by Stirner (unions of egoists) and Emile Armand (amorous camaraderie). Also how to approach the issue of contemporary mass educational systems as dominated by the state and church in which they considered the arguments of a variety of authors such as Rousseau, Francisco Ferrer I Guardia, Paul Robin and Han Ryner while advocating for alternatives such as auto-education understood as an intrinsic part of life. For them “Free love is seen as “a metaphor individual liberation” and within it the views of Emile Armand (“plural love”) are highly influential as well as the neo-malthusianism of Paul Robin which advocated birth control and sex education. An important “armandian” author for “plural love” within the Spanish IA press is Mariano Gallardo while Felix Marti Ibañez follows Robin’s neomalthusianism. Sennaicism and anacionalism were understood as “the disappearance of all nations as sovereign unities combined with the expansion of the Esperanto and Ido artificial languages. Nationalism was seen as an important reason behind wars alongside capitalist and imperialist interests and so from there they proceeded towards anti-militarism and conscious objection. An important influence also was Naturism which could be understood as “a response to these deviations caused by progress, a sort of dissidence against the evolution of industrial societies in which the person was many times undervalued

and reduced to the category of object. In naturism, on the other hand, the individual was seen as the center and motor, and his main end was his integral regeneration. Also, naturism aspired to be an open space to the margins of the friction points in which occidental societies have fragmented” (Diez, 2007, pág. 305) And so an issue highly associated with naturist philosophies is that of nudism as such “if naturism was the result of a sum of diverse tendencies and will have diverse origins. Its irruption in Spain and within the most individualist milieus have been also studied by Josep Maria Sorello and Eduard Masjuan.” (Diez, 2007, pág. 317) This could be seen specifically when in many editions of the Spanish IA press the cover will feature a nude individual in naturist nudist practices and games, something which will be a source of controversy even within the anarchist sectors.

I reviewed a recent US produced compilation of “egoist” anarchists called *Enemies of Society: An Anthology of Individualist & Egoist Thought*, which appeared in the site anarchistnews.org titled “On boring and pathetic “Egoists” and anarchist individualists: A review of the *Enemies of Society: An anthology of Individualist and Egoist thought*” (Iconoclasta, 2013). My review there argued that the authors of the compilation pushed forward a reductionist view of IA which went to reject and deride the experiences and views of US individualist anarchists such as Warren, Tucker and Thoreau and then swallow a-critically the particular views of a later self-described “archist” egoist writer called S.E. Parker. These authors there say about the US individualist anarchist Benjamin Tucker that he “attempted to forge individualist anarchism into a coherent system through an ill-conceived fusion of Proudhon’s economic theories and Max Stirner’s uncompromising egoism...Although we have no desire to dwell excessively on Tucker’s overly idealistic theories in this anthology...” (VVAA, 2011, pág. xx) So there go the particular opinions of the authors of the compilation which for all their “anti-idealism” and perceptions of “ill-conceptions” I argued in my review of their work that “they decided not to present a wider more complex picture of individualist anarchism but to dedicate their text to the frustrations and laments of S.E. Parker.” (Iconoclasta, 2013)

But on top of this let’s take into account the main goal of the compilation *Enemies*. After informing us their view that Tucker’s individualism was “ill-conceived” and “idealistic” they say that “the primary focus of this anthology...is to explore the development of anarchist individualism in Europe” (VVAA, 2011, pág. xxi) For someone who seriously wants a work that does this purpose I give them my personal opinion that the compilation *Enemies* is a highly prejudiced work lacking in basic academic rigurocity. Not that I overvalue academic or scholar rigurocity but if you are not going to seriously engage with the subject of European IA you might as well just say something similar to “the primary focus of this anthology is to explore the development of anarchist individualism in Europe according to the view of our beloved anarchist S.E.Parker which is the view about the subject which we find anti-idealistic and well-conceived”. Well, at least if you want to be honest with you readers. Personally I prefer and even enjoy open acknowledgement of personal whim and/or laziness instead of pretentious statements like “explore the development of anarchist individualism in Europe”. But also I can argue that another defect of the *Enemies* is a concentration on philosophical discussion of individualist anarchism as if it was a tendency centered on cafes and minds of intellectuals not worried about how to put their ideas into practice.

In contrast Diez reports that in Spain “within the strictly anarchist world we find some theorists like Ricardo Mella, who, due to his knowledge of the English language, knows deeply the work of (Benjamin) Tucker and that of the north American individualists, especially by reading

regularly the British magazine Freedom and the north American ones The Alarm (Chicago) and the tuckerian Liberty (Boston)...Uncomfortable within the polemics between collectivists and libertarian communists, the Galician anarchist tries to integrate the different ideological currents under the proposal of Tarrida del Marmol of an anarchism without adjectives.” (Diez, 2007, pag. 92) And so the experiences which will be dealt in the next section of this article show how they were preceded by the rich experiences of US individualist anarchism going back to Josiah Warren’s experimental communities and exchange systems, the militancy for civil liberties on issues of thought and sovereignty over one’s body and one’s sexual desires as was the case of Moses Harman and Ezra Heywood, and of course the diversity and depth of philosophical and practical reflection present within the pages of Benjamin Tucker’s Liberty.

Eclectic lifestyle anarchisms

Unlike Murray Bookchin, I do not regard “lifestyle anarchism” as a bad thing or as “bourgeois deviation” but actually both a honest anarchist approach to life. Also unlike Bookchin I tend to not see an “unbridgeable chasm” between lifestyle anarchism and “social anarchism” if this latter thing is understood as achieving a degree of change in society.

All of these had as main mediums of expression periodical publications such as La Revista Blanca, Estudios, Etica, Iniciales and Nosotros. And alongside Ateneos Libertarios (something close to infoshops) more aligned with anarcho-syndicalism and anarcho-communism there existed ones like the “Ateneo Naturista Eclectico” which will tend towards the individualist anarchists positions even though it will be open to anarcho-syndicalists and anarcho-communists as well as with the case of the individualist publications which will be widely read also by workers and anarcho-communist militants belonging to the IAF and the CNT anarchist trade union. Diez even reports that these magazines were very often carried across the ocean to Argentina and Uruguay to the anarchist sectors there.

Also it is reported that “influenced by the french experiences of milieux livres , they explore the possibilities of creating communes of individualists, and from the magazine (Iniciales) there appear some initiatives in this sense... The revolution pushed forward after the military putsch of 1936 makes possible the realization of some of this expectations and the magazine reports some of the experiences developed, such as that realized by a group of individualist anarchists, in an expropriated farm, in Cerdanyola del Valles.” (Diez, 2007, pag. 161)

This kind of associations could also express in other forms and so following Emile Armand created affinity groups in which “one of the functions of this association was to put into practice his thesis of amorous camaraderie and its explicit sexual content...after trying to achieve an equilibrium between sexes there is established an identity document, with a passport which will serve as proof of membership and a list of addresses available for members which will solicit them.” (Diez, 2007, pag. 166) From there, organizations such as The Association against Jealousy, the International Association for combat against sexual jealousy and sexual exclusivism within love or the Atlantis club “which only admitted couples, and so, functioned as a network of couple interchange which will not feel prejudice in advertising itself in magazines of pornographic content.” (Diez, 2007, pag. 166)

As far as the link with naturism in the magazine Iniciales “there will start to appear photographs of some of the members of the affinity group which edit the magazine...many of these images are taken during excursions, gymnastic exercises or recreational activities.” (Diez, 2007, pag. 321)

As a form of conclusion

I have tried to write this article as a form of showing the diversity of debates and practices present within Spanish individualist anarchism as shown by the book of Xavier Diez of which there seem to be not enough awareness within the anglo world in which individualist anarchism is reduced and around which a lot of ignorance and prejudice exists. So Spanish IA was not too separated from mass organized anarchism and it is possible to argue that IA made possible to introduce a wider debate within CNT workers and FAI members than it would have been possible if they stayed inside a socialist centered “social anarchist” discourse and problematic, which doesn’t mean the individualist did not helped in the causes of workers and peasants.

One of my goals in this article might be to contradict the prejudice also of contemporary “social anarchist” sectors which will reduce the experiences of IA to selfish egoism mostly of a metaphysical kind while it is clear they tried to live their philosophy in exciting and complex forms which ended up enriching anarchism and anarchist movements as a whole. It seems to me that this was the reason for the overall strength of the Spanish anarchist movement as a whole and how it could go beyond mere trade union militancy and insurrectionist plotting against the state. In the end the Spanish individualist anarchist tried to change their lives in the now and so perhaps going beyond a false dichotomy of reform vs. revolution.

Hopefully this article could also work for informing anglo readers of a highly interesting and important work of anarchist historiography which clearly seems to me deserves translation into the English language. Until that happens I hope this will work as a call for the imagination of anarchic presents and not just of anarchic futures.

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