Archists, Anarchists and Egoists

Sidney E. Parker

> "I am an anarchist! Wherefore I will not rule And also ruled I will not be." — John Henry Mackay

> "What I get by force I get by force, and what I do not get by force I have no right to." — Max Stirner

In his book *Max Stirner's Egoism* John P. Clark claims that Stirner is an anarchist, but that his anarchism is "greatly inadequate". This is because "he opposes domination of the ego by the State, but he advises people to seek to dominate others in any other way they can manage…Stirner, for all his opposition to the State…still exalts the will to dominate."

Clark's criticism springs from his definition of anarchism as opposition to "domination" in all its forms "not only domination of subjects by political rulers, but domination of races by other races, of females by males, of the young by the old, of the weak by the strong, and not least of all, the domination of nature by humans."

In view of the comprehensiveness of his definition it is odd that Clark still sees Stirner's philosophy as a type of anarchism — albeit a "greatly inadequate" one. He is quite correct in stating that the *leitmotif* of *theoretical* anarchism is opposition to domination and that, despite his anti-Statist sentiments, Stirner has no *principled* objection to domination. Indeed, he writes "I know that my freedom is diminished even by my not being able to carry out my will on another object, be this something without will, like a government, an individual etc."

Is conscious egoism, therefore, compatible with anarchism? There is no doubt that it is possible to formulate a concept of anarchism that is ostensibly egoistic. For many years I tried to do this and I know of several individuals who still claim to be anarchists because they are egoists. The problem, however, is that anarchism as a *theory* of non-domination demands that individuals refrain from dominating others *even if they could gain greater satisfaction from dominating than from not dominating*. To allow domination would be to deny anarchism. In other words, the "freedom" of the anarchist is yet another yoke placed around the neck of the individual in the name of yet another conceptual imperative.

The question was answered at some length by Dora Marsden in two essays that appeared in her review for *The Egoist* September 12, 1914 and February 1, 1915. The first was entitled *The Illusion of Anarchism*; the second *some critics answered.*

Some months before the appearance of her first essay on anarchism Marsden had been engaged in a controversy with the redoubtable Benjamin Tucker in which she had defended what she called "egoist anarchism" against what she saw as the "clerico-libertarianism" of Tucker. At the premature end of the controversy Tucker denounced her as an "egoist and archist," to which she replied that she was quite willing to "not — according to Mr Tucker — be called 'Anarchist'" but responded readily to "Egoist".

In the interval between the end of the controversy and the publication of her first essay she had evidently given considerable thought to the relation of egoism to anarchism and had decided that the latter was something in which she could no longer believe. The gist of her new position was as follows:

Every form of life is archistic.

> "An archist is one who seeks to establish, maintain, and protect by the strongest weapons at his disposal, the law of his own interest." All growing life-forms are aggressive: "aggressive is what growing means. Each fights for its own place, and to enlarge it, and enlarging it is a growth. And because life-forms are gregarious there are myriads of claims to lay exclusive hold on any place. The claimants are myriad: bird, beast, plant, insect, vermin — each will assert its sole claim to any place as long as it is permitted: as witness the pugnacity of gnat, weed, and flea, the scant ceremony of the housewife's broom, the axe which makes a clearing, the scythe, the fisherman's net, the slaughter- house bludgeon: all assertions of aggressive interest promptly countered by more powerful interests! The world falls to him who can take it, if instinctive action can tell us anything."

It is this aggressive 'territoriality' that motivates domination.

> "The living unit is an organism of embodied wants; and a want is a term which indicates an apprehension of the existence of barriers — conditions easy or hard — which lie between the 'setting onwards' and the 'arrival', i.e. the satisfaction. Thus every want has two sides, obverse and reverse, of which the one would read the 'not yet dominated', and the other 'progressive domination'. The two sides grow at the expense of each other. The co-existence of the consciousness of a lacking satisfaction, with the corresponding and inevitable 'instinct to dominate', that which prolongs the lack, are features which characterize 'life'. Bridging the interval between the want and its satisfaction is the exercising of the 'instinct to dominate' — obstructing conditions. The distinction between the lifeless and the living is comprised under an inability to be other than a victim to conditions. That of which the latter can be said, possesses life; that of which the former, is inanimate. It is to this doministic instinct to which we have applied the label archistic."

Of course, this exercising of the doministic instinct does not result in every life-form becoming dominant. Power being naturally unequal the struggle for predominance usually settles down into a condition in which the less powerful end up being dominated by the more powerful. Indeed, many of the less powerful satisfy the instinct to dominate by identifying themselves with those who actually do dominate: "the great lord can always count on having doorkeepers in abundance."

Marsden argues that anarchists are among those who, like Christians, seek to muzzle the dominist tendency by urging us to renounce our desires to dominate. Their purpose "is to make men willing to assert that though they are born and inclined archists they *ought* to be anarchists." Faced with "this colossal encounter of interest, i.e. of lives… the anarchist breaks in with his 'Thus far and no further'" and "introduces his 'law' of 'the inviolability of individual liberty'." The anarchist is thus a *principled embargoist* who sees in domination the evil of evils. "'It is the first article of my faith that archistic encroachments upon the 'free' activity of Men are not compatible with the respect due to the dignity of Man as Man. The ideal of Humanity forbids the domination of one man by his fellows'… This humanitarian embargo is an Absolute: a procedure of which the observance is Good-in-itself. The government of Man by Man is wrong: the respect of an embargo constitutes Right."

The irony is, that in the process of seeking to establish this condition of non-domination called anarchy, the anarchist would be compelled to turn to a sanction that is but another form of domination. In the *theoretical* society of the anarchist they would have to resort to the intra-individual domination of *conscience* in order to prevent the inter-individual domination that characterizes political government. In the end, therefore, anarchism boils down to a species of "clerico-libertarianism" and is the gloss covering the wishes of "a unit possessed of the instinct to dominate — even his fellow-men."

Not only this, but faced with the *practical* problems of achieving the "Free Society", the anarchist fantasy would melt away before the realities of power. "'The State is fallen, long live the State' — the furthest going revolutionary anarchist cannot get away from this. On the morrow of his successful revolution he would need to set about finding means to protect his 'anarchistic' notions: and would find himself protecting his own interests with all the powers he could command, like an archist: formulating his laws and maintaining his State, until some franker archist arrived to displace and supersede him."

Nonetheless, having abandoned anarchism Marsden has no intention of returning to an acceptance of the *authority* of the State and its laws for this would be to confuse

> "an attitude which refused to hold laws and interests sacred (i.e. whole unquestioned, untouched) and that which refuses to respect the existence of forces, of which Laws are merely the outward visible index. It is a very general error, but the anarchist is especially the victim of it: the greater intelligence of the archist will understand that though laws considered as sacred are foolishness, respect for any and every law is due for just the amount of retaliatory force there may be involved in it, if it be flouted. Respect for 'sanctity' and respect for 'power' stand at opposite poles, the respecter of the one is the verbalist, of the other — the archist: the egoist."

I agree with Dora Marsden. Anarchism is a redemptionist secular religion concerned to purge the world of the sin of political government. Its adherents envisage a "free society" in which all archistic acts are forbidden. Cleansed of the evil of domination "mankind" will live, so they say, in freedom and harmony and our present "oppressions" will be confined to the pages of history books. When, therefore, Marsden writes that "anarchists are not separated in any way from kinship with the devout. They belong to the Christian Church and should be recognized as Christianity's picked children" she is not being merely frivolous. Anarchism is a *theory* of an ideal society — whether communist, mutualist, or individualist, matters little in this respect — of

necessity must demand *renunciation* of domination both in means and ends. That in *practice* it would necessitate another form of domination for its operation is a contradiction not unknown in other religions — which in no way alter their essence.

The conscious egoist, in contrast, is not bound by any demand for renunciation of domination and if it is within his competence he will dominate others *if this is in his interest.* That anarchism and egoism are not equivalent is admitted, albeit unwillingly, by the well-known American anarchist John Beverley Robinson — who depicted an anarchist society in the most lachrymous terms in his *Rebuilding the World* — in his succinct essay *Egoism.* Throwing anarchist principles overboard he writes of the egoist that "if the State does things that benefit him, he will support it; if it attacks him and encroaches on his liberty, he will evade it by any means in his power, if he is not strong enough to withstand it." Again, "if the law happens to be to his advantage, he will avail himself of it; if it invades his liberty he will transgress it as far as he thinks it wise to do so. But he has no regard for it as a thing supernal."

Robinson thus denies the validity of the anarchist principle of non-domination, since the existence of the State and its laws necessitates the existence of a permanent apparatus of repression. If I make use of them for my advantage, then I invoke their repressive power against anyone who stands opposed to what I want. In other words, I make use of an *archistic* action to gain my end.

Egoism, *conscious* egoism, seen for what it is instead of being pressed into the service of a utopian ideology, has nothing to do with what Marsden well-called "clerico-libertarianism". It means, as she put it in her controversy with Tucker, "…a tub for Diogenes; a continent for Napoleon; control of a Trust for Rockefeller; all that I desire for me: *if we can get them.*" It is not based upon any fantasy for its champions are well aware of the vital difference between "if I want something I ought to get it" and "being competent to achieve what I want". The egoist lives among the realities of power in the world of archists, not among the myths of the renouncers in the dream world of anarchists.

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