

Geo-Syndicalism

INTRODUCTION

IN THIS SHORT ESSAY we will be looking at the potential marriage between geonarchism, as presented by Fred Foldvary, and anarcho-syndicalism, as introduced by Rudolf Rocker. We will first look at each philosophy on its own, before looking to their synthesis.

GEOANARCHISM

GEOANARCHISM IS A PHILOSOPHY (first named by Fred Foldvary), which reconciles Georgism with anarchism. For those unaware, Georgism is a political philosophy which supports the common ownership of land and community access to its rent (that part of wealth which is not due to labor, but to varying grades of land); and anarchism is a philosophy which opposes the state, or government. Like all anarchists, geonarchists oppose state intervention; like all Georgists, geonarchists support the common ownership of land and its rent.

Georgists are not unusually called “single-taxers,” because many of them take a libertarian approach to the economy, suggesting that land is the only thing which should be taxed, with taxes either to be used for public goods, or to distribute wealth more fairly. Anarchism, however, takes a strong stance against taxation. Instead, geonarchists support community land trusts, or similarly-styled organizations. According to Fred Foldvary,

In a libertarian or anarchist world, some people might be unaffiliated anarcho-capitalists, contracting with various firms for services. But if we look at markets today, we see instead contractual communities. We see condominiums, homeowner associations, cooperatives, and neighborhood associations. For temporary lodging, folks stay in hotels, and stores get lumped into shopping centers. Historically, human beings have preferred to live and work in communities.¹

Indeed, it’s hard to go anywhere without noticing the combinations of human efforts. Anarchism would allow interpersonal relationships to flourish. Foldvary suggests further that,

Geoist communities would join together in leagues and associations to provide services that are more efficient on a large scale, such as defense, if needed. The voting and financing would be bottom up. The local communities would elect representatives, and provide finances, and would be able to secede when they felt association was no longer in their interest.¹

As mutualists have suggested, and Fred here seems to repeat, the free and fair market would ensure that the internal affairs of associations remain just, usually entailing cooperative ownership and democratic management. Those associations that aren’t fair won’t be supported, and will fail.

No doubt, there may be competing systems of land-tenure, but the sheer efficiency of Georgism will allow it to come out on top. Fred says,

In the anarchist context, private communities and companies would provide the civic works and collect the payments by contract. Geoist communities would try to assess how much of the rental is natural rent, and distribute that equally to the population in those communities. Market anarchists outside the geoist leagues would probably be hostile to this rent-sharing system and might refuse to trade with the geoists, but that would not be much of a problem for geoists, since the efficiency of geoism would attract much of the enterprise.¹

As capitalist land-tenure may certainly create rich people, those rich people come at the expense of even more poor people, who must labor to subsidize them. If given the chance to operate without state influence, community land trusts—or geonarchist associations—would consistently suck up membership from the lower classes of anarcho-capitalist societies (since they would provide low-cost land-tenure), eventually draining them completely. First, they need to be established.

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM IS AN APPLIED PHILOSOPHY which promotes the use of trade-unions to seize the means of production and put into place an anarchist society. When describing it himself, Rudolf Rocker—perhaps the idea’s most celebrated philosophical proponent—suggests that, “Modern Anarcho-Syndicalism is the direct reaction against the concepts and methods of political Socialism.”²

Anarcho-syndicalists have no faith in the state’s ability to distribute wealth on society’s behalf. Instead, they think collective direct-action must be taken to emancipate the workers:

Anarcho-Syndicalists are convinced that a Socialist economic order cannot be created by the decrees and statutes of a government, but only by the solidaric collaboration of the workers with hand or brain in each special branch of production; that is, through the taking over of the management of all plants by the producers themselves under such form that the separate groups, plants and branches of industry are independent members of the general economic organism and systematically carry on production and the distribution of the products in the interest of the community on the basis of free mutual agreements.²

Instead of use of parliamentary politics, or indirect action, the anarcho-syndicalists promoted the use of collective direct-action, which would create a new, free, socialist, economy. Rudolf Rocker was a prominent anarcho-syndicalist, but he was also an anarchist-without-adjectives. By socialism, he meant it in the widest of terms, not restricting society to simplistic models of behavior. He believed all forms of anarchism could coexist, and likely would do so:

Common to all Anarchists is the desire to free society of all political and social coercive institutions which stand in the way of development of a free humanity. In this sense Mutualism, Collectivism and Communism are not to be regarded as closed systems permitting no further development, but merely as economic assumptions as to the means of safeguarding a free community. There will even probably be in society of the future different forms of economic co-operation operating side by side, since any social progress must be associated with that free experiment and practical testing out for which in a society of free communities there will be afforded every opportunity.³

Though he personally aspired toward communism, he nevertheless suggested this communism should be built voluntarily from the ground up, for those who want it:

The organisation of Anarcho-Syndicalism is based on the principles of Federalism, on free combination from below upward, putting the right of self-determination of every member above everything else and recognising only the organic agreement of all on the basis of like interests and common convictions.⁴

It may seem strange to some for a philosophy to simultaneously promote the use of force *and* the voluntary organization of society. It's important to note, for the reason, that the anarchist use of force is purely defensive in nature. The anarchists had no desire to take power, but, rather, to dissolve it. This entailed a process. Rocker says,

according to the Syndicalist view, the trade union, the syndicate, is the unified organisation of labour and has for its purpose the defence of the interests of the producers within existing society and the preparing for and the practical carrying out of the reconstruction of social life after the pattern of Socialism. It has, therefore, a double purpose: 1. As the fighting organisation of the workers against the employers to enforce the demands of the workers for the safeguarding and raising of their standard of living; 2. As the school for the intellectual training of the workers to make them acquainted with the technical management of production and economic life in general so that when a revolutionary situation arises they will be capable of taking the socio-economic organism into their own hands and remarking it according to Socialist principles.

Anarcho-Syndicalists are of the opinion that political parties, even when they bear a socialist name, are not fitted to perform either of these two tasks. The mere fact that, even in those countries where political Socialism commanded powerful organisations and had millions of voters behind it, the workers had never been able to dispense with trade unions because legislation offered them no protection in their struggle for daily bread, testifies to this.⁴

The anarcho-syndicalist vision is the creation of a (small-s) socialist society, built from the ground up. The workers join the union, the union joins the syndicate, and the syndicate joins the federation, all without compulsion. The unions strike, the syndicate sympathy strikes, and the federation eventually expropriates the means of production. The syndicalists certainly wanted to educate the masses, but they had no plans of letting it stop there, they wanted it to show results:

For the Anarcho-Syndicalists the trade union is by no means a mere transitory phenomenon bound up with the duration of capitalist society, it is the germ of the Socialist society of the future, the elementary school of Socialism in general.⁴

GEO-SYNDICALISM

MY VISION FOR GEO-SYNDICALISM is one of marriage between anarcho-syndicalist praxis with geoanarchist philosophy. In essence, it would be the use of tenant unions to set into place a geoanarchist society. Where anarcho-syndicalism was an effort to transform the capitalist workplace into self-managed worker-democracies, geoanarchism would be an effort to gain sovereignty on behalf of tenant unions, ending their status as unions, and claiming their status as community land trusts.

The scale on which common trust is necessary is up to various factors. Should the whole world be held in one trust? Should many trusts exist independently? Should they federate? These are difficult questions,

and I am yet to conclude a hard answer myself, but my soft answer is that I believe many different models can be experimented with, and the best will naturally rise to the top. If we find that this market leads to a worldwide natural monopoly, so be it, so long as it is a participatory one, which functions on principles of federation and subsidiarity. If this is unnecessary, it should not be forced.

In Spain, during the Revolution, the libertarians experimented with various different models under the federal authority of the CNT (National Confederation of Labor, Spanish acronym). Ronald Fraser, in *Blood of Spain*, suggests that,

From the beginning, the CNT supported different solutions, both locally and nationally. At the latter level, Madrid had called for the 'classic' anarcho-syndicalist line of *socialization* of large industry, business, and transport (by which it meant that the unions should run, but not own, them), workers' control in other private enterprises and the planning of large industry. Barcelona, on the other hand, proposed *collectivization* of all enterprises without distinction, with profits to be handed over to a common fund administered by the Economics Council of Catalonia [...]⁵

[...]

there was a heated discussion between the advocates of *socialization* and *cooperativization*. The bigger, more powerful unions, like the woodworkers, the transport workers, the public entertainments union, all of which had already socialized their industries, wanted to extend their solution to the rest of industry. The smaller, weaker unions wanted to form cooperatives, arguing that the latter would retain the identity of each firm.⁶

He says,

Collectivization, socialization, cooperativization—few people could give a precise definition of what was meant by the different terms being used. But one thing dominated the libertarian revolution: the practice of self-management—the workers' administration of their factories and industries.⁷

Just as the Spanish anarchists came up with various solutions, the same can be done with geosyndicalism. The interesting thing about syndicalism is it is more of a praxis than an outcome-based philosophy. Mutualists, communists, collectivists—and, I suggest, even Georgists—can be syndicalists. Indeed, even Mussolini made use of syndicalism: national syndicalism. The Spanish anarchists had various visions within the CNT: some wanted their shop committee to take ownership of the firm after the revolution, as in a cooperative, while others wanted various levels of socialization, or complete collectivization. Just as a labor federation can transform an economy into a sea of independent cooperatives, or can opt to keep ownership on a federal level, the same can be done with tenant unions: amidst the seizing of land, they can keep ownership at the federal level which was necessarily constructed in order to expropriate, or they can allocate sovereignty to land trusts based on bioregions. Most likely, in my own opinion, would be a sort of henocentric law (one big law, many small laws: federalism), wherein the federation remains, which is then responsible for allocating charters to smaller land trusts, perhaps with multiple layers of association.

For those unfamiliar with tenant syndicalism, allow me to state a case: Co-op City. Built atop the abandoned Freedomland theme park, on swamp land, in the Bronx, New York, Co-op City is the largest cooperative housing development in the world. As one site suggests,

The project was sponsored and built by the United Housing Foundation[...] and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.

[...]

The construction of the community was financed with a mortgage loan from New York State's Housing Finance Agency (HFA). The complex defaulted on the loan in 1975 and has had ongoing agreements to pay back HFA, until 2004 when it was financially unable to continue payments due to the huge costs of emergency repairs. New York Community Bank helped Riverbay [the Co-op's company name] satisfy its \$57 million mortgage obligation, except for \$95 million in arrears, by refinancing the loan later that same year. This led to the agreement that Co-op City would remain in the Mitchell-Lama Housing Program for at least seven more years as a concession on the arrears and that any rehabilitation that Co-op City took on to improve the original poor construction (which happened under the State's watch) would earn credit toward eliminating the debt. By 2008, Riverbay had submitted enough proof of construction repairs to pay off the balance of arrears to New York State.

Co-op City is situated in The Bronx, at the northeastern edge of New York City. Mismanagement, shoddy construction and corruption lead to the community defaulting on its loan in 1975. The original Kazan board resigned and the state took over control. Cooperators were faced with a 25 percent increase in their monthly maintenance fees. Instead, a rent-strike was organized. New York State threatened to foreclose on the property, and evict the tenants - which would mean the loss of their equity. But Cooperators stayed united and held out 13 months (the longest and largest rent-strike in United States history) before a compromise was finally reached, with mediation from then Bronx Borough President, Robert Abrams, and then Secretary of State, Mario Cuomo. Cooperators would remit \$20 million in back pay, but they would get to take over management of the complex and set their own fees.⁸

This is just a minor example of the potential for tenant organization. What could they do if an entire region of the country went on such a rent-strike, as decided by a democratic tenant's union? There is not enough room in the jails, nor scabs for the machinery of an entire region; the rich would have to evacuate, but this would be uncomfortable, and unlikely. What can they do if the population rises? If we recount what happened in Tiananmen Square, the first set of troops sent in to crush the student-worker protests were reasoned with, and actually fired upon the next round of troops who had been sent in, and who did not speak the same language. We lack the language barriers here; it would be much easier to reason with our military personnel, convince them that they have brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, fighting on our side, and for that reason they should not fire upon their own citizens. It is really the military that must be convinced in order to abolish power, but this depends firstly on the concerted activity of the working— and, indeed, renting—classes.

CONCLUSION

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM AND GEOANARCHISM are quite compatible. When applied to tenant issues, syndicalism is a viable method by which direct-action may be applied to redistribute land according to Georgist means.

REFERENCES

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