Ryley, Peter. "Individualist anarchism in late Victorian Britain." *Making Another World Possible: Anarchism, Anti-Capitalism and Ecology in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Britain*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 87–116. Contemporary Anarchist Studies. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501306754.ch-004>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 00:46 UTC.

Copyright © Peter Ryley 2013. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

4

Individualist anarchism in late Victorian Britain

If the Spencerian individualists had laid down their marker as being strongly anti-socialist, despite wanting to transform the capitalism of their day into something radically different, the co-existent individualist anarchists had no such compunction. It is best to see them as the left wing of the individualist movement that grew from the ideas current in the early part of the century. They were unambiguous about the state and far more vehement in their opposition to finance capitalism, sometimes embracing the label socialist with relish. They were much closer to the Ricardian socialists and to Proudhon in their political economy. They were certainly not worried about calling themselves revolutionaries, even if their revolution was to be achieved through non-violent, economic direct action. Some also brought a different nuance to the movement's ideology, being influenced by Stirner's Egoism.

As well as European influences, individualist anarchism also drew from the United States. American individualism was well-established and prominent, beginning with Josiah Warren and culminating with Benjamin Tucker's newspaper *Liberty*, the high point for the tradition. This has led some historians to marginalize British individualism, concentrating solely on the United States. John Quail, the British movement's first historian,¹ did acknowledge its existence, but focused on the activities of the anarcho-communists. Nevertheless, Quail did see Tucker's *Liberty* as the starting point for the English anarchist movement as it was the first English language anarchist paper available in Britain, being distributed from 1881 onwards.²

It is possible to see British individualist anarchism representing a fusion of European ideas, particularly those of Proudhon, with this emerging Atlanticism, especially as British individualists were regular contributors to Tucker's journal.³ However, to do so would be to relegate the strong native

tradition, discussed in the first chapter. This strand had not disappeared and, though it only appears in glimpses, there is a direct link between the radical thought of the early and later part of the centuries. British individualism was a distinctive fusion of these three traditions, American, European and British. A graphic example of how this was is the life and work of Ambrose Custon Cuddon.

Max Nettlau rescued Cuddon from obscurity, wrote about him in *Freedom*⁴ and preserved his few extant publications. Cuddon had American connections, being influenced by the correspondence between Josiah Warren and the Owenites,⁵ and had also visited America in 1858. Clearly identifying with anarchism, he later headed the deputation that greeted Bakunin when he arrived in London in January 1862, whilst, at the age of 83, he met Benjamin Tucker on his visit to London in 1874.⁶ Cuddon was the secretary of a group known as the London Confederation of Rational Reformers whose programme, which Nettlau assumes was written by Cuddon, prefigured the main themes of individualist anarchist political economy, a free currency and mutualist exchange. Their underpinning philosophy was fundamentally individualist.

Liberty – *the sovereignty of the individual* – is the highest good of life, for which no artificial substitute, however ingeniously disguised, can ever be made an adequate compensation.⁷

The other conduit for these early radical ideas was freethought⁸ and many anarchists started out in the movement. For instance, the leading individualist anarchist, Henry Seymour, began his activism by engaging in agitation for secularism, establishing his Secular Hall and Science Library in his hometown of Tunbridge Wells in Kent. Freethought was not solely concerned with religion, it wished to secularize the way we thought, to spread rationality and clarity in the place of superstition. And once again, Cuddon is an example of the fusion between freethinking and anarchism, when he wrote about the misuse of language. He put it succinctly: ‘the bulk of mankind are, and have ever been, the egregious dupes of language.’⁹ Political language is, he argued, an exercise in deception, through its imprecision. Concepts such as prosperity are entirely relative depending on to whom they apply. One of the best examples he gave was how MPs’ concept of working-class prosperity was somewhat different to how they understood their own. If the political elite had the same level of wealth as they thought suitable for the working classes, ‘most of them would think they were utterly ruined and commit suicide’.¹⁰ He wrote eloquently, as George Orwell was later to do in his celebrated essay *Politics and the English Language*, of how euphemism is used to hide real meanings. For example, he quoted President Pierce at his inauguration attempting to sanitize slavery as ‘involuntary servitude’.¹¹ This critique of the use of language is also to

be found in Herbert Spencer's work and the later anarcho-communist, Louisa Bevington, used it as the main framework for the defence of atheism with which she first made her name. Arguably, freethought provided the conceptual toolbox for the anarchists' social critique that augmented their political economy.

The British individualist anarchists

The bulk of the publications to emerge from the individualist anarchist movement in Britain were produced by a small group of diverse writers and activists, notably John Badcock, John Armsden, John Basil Barnhill, Albert Tarn, Henry Seymour and Lothrop Withington.

John Badcock, an accountant who later became a dealer in Chinese art,¹² was a Stirnerite egoist. Egoism and individualist anarchism are not synonymous, although this book is not the right place for an in-depth discussion of the differences. It could seem that, for example, Stirner's use of 'ownness' as a critique of freedom, together with his denial of an external natural right, would question their ability to collaborate. Yet, there were many instances of cross-fertilization between the two, even in the area of political economy. For example, Badcock, together with others influenced by Stirner, shared many individualist concerns and contributed to their discussions on the nature of a free society. Badcock was also active in the group Free Currency Propaganda, together with John Armsden and Henry Seymour, and had been involved in the Legitimation League, formed to campaign against the bastardy laws, which gathered support from a wide range of liberal and libertarian activists. Egoism was further represented by John Basil Barnhill, whose witty journal, *The Eagle and the Serpent*, published between 1898 and 1903, waged a war on what it called 'altruism' in all its guises, the most notable being the willingness of ordinary people to work for the benefit of the rich.

Of greater importance to the development of individualist ideas was Albert Tarn. Yorkshire born from Huddersfield, Tarn was the publisher of *The Herald of Anarchy* and came closest to the libertarian political economy espoused by Tucker. He was one of Tucker's agents for the distribution of *Liberty* in Britain. Tarn had been a member of William Morris's Socialist League, though it is hard to see how he fitted in comfortably given his distinctive views. He had pet obsessions that recur throughout his writings, most notably his opposition to the Post Office monopoly, which he referred to, with a characteristic lack of proportion, as 'a stupid monstrosity instituted and perpetrated for the purpose of maintaining authority'.¹³ He was also an advocate of 'rational spelling', a movement designed to reform written English, rendering, for example, 'neighbours'

as ‘nabers’ and ‘although’ as ‘altho’, despite claiming in *The Herald of Anarchy* ‘that we shall not go out of the way to spell “foneticalli”’.¹⁴

The most prolific writer and energetic activist was Henry Seymour and much of this article necessarily focuses on him. Seymour’s interests were far wider than individualism. He was a publisher, editor and campaigner who had first gained minor notoriety in 1882 when, as secretary of the Tunbridge Wells branch of the National Secular Society, he was prosecuted for blasphemy.¹⁵ Seymour had strong links with the Legitimation League and its journal, *The Adult*, which he later edited. He also formed the Free Press Defence Committee to defend the League’s secretary, George Bedborough, against his prosecution for selling Havelock Ellis’ book *Sexual Inversion*, a major cause célèbre for the radical movement. Seymour also played a role in the early development of the wider British anarchist movement by turning over his journal, *The Anarchist*, to the leading members of what were to become the Freedom Group, notably the anarcho-communists Peter Kropotkin and Charlotte Wilson.

The Anarchist was an eclectic journal from the beginning. Its first issue contained a contribution from Elisee Réclus and George Bernard Shaw’s celebrated ‘What’s in a Name’, later republished in Tucker’s *Liberty*. Charlotte Wilson also contributed under the by-line of ‘An English Anarchist’. However, in a series of editorials, Seymour committed himself to the main principles of individualist anarchism and a complete rejection of collectivism. In a review of the Lyon Manifesto, issued by the defendants in the trial of 1883 that led to the imprisonment of Peter Kropotkin, he wrote: ‘the idea of holding capital in common is absurd’.¹⁶ So it was surprising to see him hand over control of the journal to communists and even, temporarily, abandon individualism itself.

Issue thirteen of *The Anarchist* of 25 March 1886 announced that it was now ‘the recognized organ of the English Anarchist Party’ and its opening page carried a coherent criticism of individualism by Severino Merlino, arguing that as production was inherently co-operative the products of labour were indivisible and therefore necessarily collective. Seymour wrote a short response, but the next issue, bearing the surprising banner ‘Communist and Revolutionary’, saw a bold declaration from Seymour: ‘In accepting the economic principles of Communism as satisfactorily established, I unhesitatingly and fearlessly adopt them’.¹⁷ On top of which, articles in *The Anarchist* were now to be unsigned and the newspaper was to be collectively edited.

Even allowing for Seymour’s attraction to fads, this was a startling conversion. In fact, it appears that it was financial concerns that led Seymour into an uncomfortable collaboration. Certainly, this was not a meeting of minds. It took only two issues for Seymour to sign his editorials again; in issue seventeen he published barbed comments against Charlotte Wilson and the editorial board and in issue eighteen, only five months after

his conversion, he published an article by Wordsworth Donisthorpe. It took until March 1888 for Seymour to confirm in writing what was obvious to any reader, that he had long rejected anarchist communism, if he had ever accepted it at all. He replied to a letter from a reader with typical bravado:

The fact of contradicting oneself is evidence of intellectual growth ... It is true I embraced Communist Anarchism some two years ago for a sufficient length of time to understand and repudiate it.¹⁸

Seymour blamed 'differing temperamental dispositions'¹⁹ for the break-up of this short-lived collaboration. Whilst egos, especially Seymour's, may well have played a part, it is clear that there were profound ideological differences, which Seymour could not repress. His association with the Freedom Group was one that the communists also seemed keen to play down. On 28 September 1896, Charlotte Wilson wrote to Alfred Marsh about an article on the origins of the *Freedom* newspaper suggesting it was better to 'leave out the reference to Seymour and *The Anarchist*. It has really nothing to do with *Freedom* which was started some time after we decided to work with Seymour no more. It would have been started if there had been no *Anarchist*'.²⁰ Individualism had begun to be airbrushed from anarchist history.

Seymour was a conspicuously modern man adopting all kinds of modish beliefs, many of which appear outlandish to twenty-first century minds, though it is easy to forget how widely they were shared. For example, eugenics, physiognomy and phrenology were part of the mainstream of Victorian science and widely advocated within radical circles. Seymour's writings were not as strange as they may seem, but they did embody two of the most striking aspects of his personality: his supreme self-confidence and his eye for the main chance. For example, he not only championed these ideas, he also saw himself as an expert. In his book, *The Physiology of Love: A Study in Stirpiculture*, he describes how human temperament is shaped by bone structure and complexion, with grave physiological consequences. He was confident enough in his expertise to be able to declare firmly: 'When both the parents to a marriage have the sanguine-encephalic temperament ... their children will die young of dropsy of the brain, or of tubercular inflammation of its membranes.'²¹ His entrepreneurship was on display, too, as he used the book to offer his services for a fee 'for the purpose of describing the temperamental condition of ladies or gentlemen ... to ensure the most satisfactory marriages'.²²

Later, his faith in the possibilities of the new science of psychology led him to the conclusion that true anarchy is possible only when we have evolved enough to become telepathic.

Every time a man is *persuaded* by another he is governed. It is impossible to be really free. Thus the anarchist can only aspire to social equality.

The time will come, however, when each man will be able to read the thoughts of every other man, and the realization of this condition in psychic development will cause men to 'voluntarily' abandon as impracticable all criminal intents.²³

It is fortunate that he advocated free love; otherwise there would be endless trouble in this new utopia.

In general, Seymour had a singular talent for ruining a good argument with wild rhetoric. Yet, despite this tendency, and sometimes because of it, he is always entertaining to read and was, at times, a hugely effective propagandist for individualist ideas.

The political economy of individualist anarchism

Henry Seymour described the 'economic substance' of individualist anarchism to be 'socialism'. He also saw the purpose of *The Anarchist* to be 'a journal of anti-political Socialism'.²⁴ This emphasis on socialism is what distinguishes individualist anarchism from liberalism, something that surprises many critics. Whereas L. Susan Brown's anarchist critique of liberal feminism²⁵ asserted that 'Individualist Anarchists are ... not in any substantial way different from liberals',²⁶ Don Werkheiser, writing about Benjamin Tucker, feels able to describe him as having 'Socialist convictions', pointing out:

today Socialism has degenerated into a doctrine of totalitarian Statism, but in the 19th Century the term referred to an intent to fundamentally re-organize the societal systems so as to return the full product of labor to the laborers.²⁷

In a thoughtful reflection on her book, ten years after its initial publication, Brown wrote that she would 'tone down some of the stronger statements ... about the commonality and differences between anarchism and liberalism' and would have argued for a 'natural alliance between anarchists and liberals' based on their 'common commitment to the individual'.²⁸ The Canadian libertarian feminist, Wendy McElroy, is probably right when she writes that the change of the conventional understanding of the word socialism means that it is hard to place individualism in the socialist tradition, but she also argues, 'with its stress upon contracts and voluntary society, individualist anarchism constituted an entirely original and distinct tradition'.²⁹

That tradition is certainly a radical one. It rejected representative democracy, called for the complete abolition of the state and the full

liberty of the individual, and argued for a revolution that would eliminate capitalism. Underpinning all is a political economy that asserts that the cause of poverty and inequality is not property, as the communists insisted, but monopoly. Individualist anarchist political economy is a sustained, revolutionary attack on classic liberalism. However, it does not reject the market and favours free competition. Individualists argue that there can be no free economy within a capitalist society. They are free-market, revolutionary, anti-capitalists. Henry Seymour and Albert Tarn were its foremost British exponents.

There are four main features of this individualist anarchist political economy, drawn predominantly from Proudhon's mutualism. The first is an opposition to both private and public monopoly and all that results from it; the second is exchange based on free markets and free currencies, regulated by contract rather than law; the third is an extensive concept of property based on use and labour; and, finally, a distinct concept of equality on the basis of equal rights of ownership and access to resources, rather than equality of outcome.

Monopoly, according to the individualists, produces three agents of exploitation. A monopoly of land produces rent, a monopoly of capital produces profit, and systems of exchange are distorted by the most important monopoly of all, the monopoly of money, producing unearned interest. And the chief protector of monopoly is the state, which uses law to maintain it whilst funding itself through taxation, an additional act of robbery.

Henry Seymour's writings give the best introduction to individualist anarchist economics. He swiftly disposes with Malthusian notions that poverty is the result of population growth outstripping the means of support: 'If there are, in this world, any consistent Malthusians, any individuals who really conscientiously believe that there are too many people, let them commit suicide.'³⁰ The cause of poverty is distribution, not population, and that distribution is distorted by monopoly.

Having disposed of Malthus, Seymour moves on to discuss rent. Seymour argued that there was a natural right of occupancy of the land that is obstructed by the institution of *legal* property. 'Rent of land is consequently a tax on the right to live.'³¹ Seymour's second journal, *The Revolutionary Review*, is full of imprecations about the evil of rent. The most purple prose was left to his friend and collaborator, the American Lothrop Withington: "'Down with the rent robber!'" must be the cry of humanity, or humanity must perish.'³² This invective may not have been unconnected with the inability to pay the rent for the magazine's premises, which led to its closure and Seymour's bankruptcy.

But it was interest, produced by the monopoly of money, which was Seymour's main target. He consistently identified the monopoly of money as the cornerstone of capitalist society and felt that it was an unmitigated

social evil. He reworked this theme throughout his writings, from a propagandist fable, *The Monomaniacs*,³³ to a rather unimpressive attempt at a critique of Marx.³⁴ After the collapse of *The Revolutionary Review*, he devoted most of his energies to currency reform and, together with John Badcock, founded *The Free Currency Propaganda* to continue his campaigns.

The individualists saw exchange rather than production as the lifeblood of economics. The free competition they advocated could not take place without free and equitable exchange. By limiting the supply of money and fixing it to an intrinsically worthless commodity, gold, capitalists appropriate the wealth produced by labour for themselves as profits. They do this through the state's enforcement of money, their monopoly, as the only medium of exchange. Work that is unrewarded with money is useless for the worker despite the value created. Workers compete against each other, not for market share, but for the scarce good, money. This depresses the price (wages) they receive for their labour, which, whilst increasing profits for the capitalists, in turn produces under-consumption. Unlike modern Social Democrats who feel that boosting the circulation of money through state expenditure can rectify this, Seymour felt that it was necessary to reconstruct exchange in such a way as to ensure that the natural value of labour is fully realized by the worker.

Seymour argued that capital is solely the product of labour and has no intrinsic value of itself. Capital is not essential to labour, but labour is to capital. Capital is merely the accumulated surplus of past labour. Therefore, the unearned increments and privileges conferred by the ownership of capital are no more than the theft of the value of labour from the labourers themselves.

As if it is not enough for the value of the labour of the workers to be extracted from them in rent, interest and profits, they are then taxed on what little remains. The taxes of the workers maintain the state. And what is the state's purpose? It exists to protect, by force if necessary, the legal right of the capitalists to the fruits of their exploitation of the workers. The workers pay for their own oppression: 'The State is an organized conspiracy of plunder, and the natural enemy of the working class.'³⁵

Whether directly or indirectly, Seymour asserted, 'all taxes ... are in reality paid by the laborer'.³⁶ Furthermore, the idea that the State can effectively redistribute wealth was ridiculed:

Taxes are undisguised blackmail. The suggestion, offered to any but children that the State renders anything like an equivalent in return for what it takes, never fails to provoke a smile. All are conscious of the fact, if too cowardly or contemptible to confess it, that taxes are but the bribes and fees which the workers are forced to feed the institutions of the State, whose sole function is to torture or exterminate those brave

and rebellious spirits who object to be bled by and righteously resist the leeches of Rent, Interest and Profit.³⁷

Albert Tarn contributed more to this attack on the money monopoly in the first of a series of articles in the anarcho-communist paper *Freedom*. He wrote:

The two primary purposes for which the State exists are these: (1) the maintenance of *legal property*, from which arises all monopolies of land, and means of labour; (2) the manufacture of the so-called *legal currency*, or medium of exchange; and practically speaking Anarchists attack these two monster evils.³⁸

Tarn was unexceptional in his analysis. He assigned the same role to the state as Seymour – the protector of privilege. He argued that conventional notions of money and property are not rational expressions of need; they are, instead, superstitions, irrational expressions of the power and interests of the few. However, he also introduced a novel element to his analysis – that of trust.

Currency, he argued, is based on an assumption that people do not have confidence in each other, thereby allowing the state to monopolize exchange. Implicit in this is his identification of the importance of trust in economic affairs together with his rejection of the notion that a natural state of relations between people can be established by the state. Trust is a prerequisite of a functioning society; therefore, it should flourish through experience, individual judgement and contract. The need for a currency is, superficially, a paranoid insistence on the inability of people to trust each other. In reality, this is an ideological cover for the monopoly of capital resulting in the hindering, rather than the facilitating, of exchange. 'Exchange is the life-blood of human society, and money which is an obstacle in the way of exchange is a vampire draining that life-blood.'³⁹ His solution would be acceptable to the communists and individualists alike.

But how can we do without money? Plainly enough. Start exchanging on any mutual principle upon which you and others can agree. Either by a Free Currency representing your goods or on a principle of Free Communism, meaning the free giving and taking of services, or by any other mutual arrangement you may devise.⁴⁰

The acceptance of the possibility of communism in exchange, undoubtedly inserted with one eye on the readership, did not extend to property and Tarn provoked a lively exchange with a second article, *Individual or Common Property?*⁴¹ In this, he took up the other great theme of individualist political economy, the importance of ownership.

Tarn placed more emphasis on possession than Seymour and provided a trenchant defence of individual property for a hostile audience, based on a clear distinction between legal and natural property. The difference is straightforward. Natural property is something that can be possessed and retained by 'might or artifice' by an individual. In effect, that means persuading someone else that it is your property. Legal property can only exist with the support of the state and the enforcement of ownership. It is in its essence coercive. Natural property, however, can be retained by individuals, either on their own or collaboratively with others, on the basis of justice without the need for the state enforcement of an abstract legal property right. Tarn illustrates this by contrasting his watch chain with the Earl of Dudley's estates. Clearly, the chain is recognizably his and can be defended by him, as an individual, against theft. How could the Earl hold onto his land if there were no police and armies, laws of trespass, etc., to protect his exclusive ownership from those who might wish to use it? The necessity of the state to uphold his ownership shows that he has no natural ownership and is thus a thief. Therefore, he concludes, flatly contradicting anarchist communism, 'distribution should be related to natural law based on the ability to hold and retain property without the State enforcing its removal'.⁴²

This article initiated a lively response from a communist audience, forcing Tarn to justify his views further. He now abandoned restraint and went on the offensive against communism with an effective 'sound bite': 'Whilst the Communists would convert the workers into thieves, the Individualists would convert the thieves into workers.'⁴³ He argued that the way rewards would be distributed was by merit according to free contract and free competition. He took an additional swipe against the practicality of communism, pointing out that there had been no attempt to implement anarchist communism, and that it was impossible to develop a propertyless society piecemeal. Anarchist communism could never be evolutionary; it had to rely on a complete revolutionary transformation to a society without property, something he viewed as somewhat unlikely.

Tarn developed his favourite themes further by launching his own paper, *The Herald of Anarchy*. Firstly, he elaborated on the Proudhonian distinction between property and possession.

The Abolition of Property raises in some people's minds an idea of Communism, but there is not much ground for such an idea for Private Ownership can exist without Private Property. Indeed, Property is a Monopoly or Possession, created by Law and upheld by the State. It is a Socialistic or Collectivist institution and Individualism will destroy it.⁴⁴

Tarn was not a monist, however. He argued that individual property could exist in a world without property in natural resources. The

natural right of property resides solely in labour and so there can be no natural right of property in land. The obvious analogy is with air. It is incapable of monopolization and therefore it is un-owned, it is necessary for life, but also is a free good that co-exists with private property. Tarn would have argued that land is the same. It too would have been a free good but for the intervention of the state, which had permitted its confiscation and accumulation. Although occupation and use of land does convey ownership, this is the sole title and there can be no ownership once it ceases to be used. Tarn was just as opposed to collectivization of land through the state. With typical lack of a sense of proportion, he claimed: 'The fact is, the public park is just as much an unwarrantable imposition as any other governmental institution.'⁴⁵

In contrast to land, property in the products of labour is a natural right. As Seymour put it, labour is 'the only equitable title to ownership'.⁴⁶ It is also an economic good, allowing for trade and competition. Any attempt at collectivization hinders production and prosperity. 'We claim however, that most social and industrial evils are traceable to the Socialism that already exists, and that they will only be removed by perfect freedom of competition.'⁴⁷

For Tarn, 'Anarchy is merely private enterprise carried to a logical conclusion'.⁴⁸ For enterprise, industry and competition to flourish there has to be trade, and for that trade to be equitable there has to be a free currency. Here he joins forces with Seymour. The monopoly of both paper and metal-based currencies places the whole of industry at 'the mercy of those who command that supply' and that money raises the value of gold above other commodities and therefore restricts credit. He also argued for the abolition of the banking laws, saying: 'if banking had been left entirely alone from the beginning there would have been today *no labour problem at all*'.⁴⁹ Taxes, too, are part of that process of using money to extract value from the producers. He advocated 'treating the tax-collector just as we should treat the pickpocket or the burglar'.⁵⁰ Tarn, also familiarly, promoted contract as the method of enforcement of all agreements.

The advocacy of a free currency, universal ownership and the end of monopoly automatically leads individualists to advocate a particular concept of equality, based on equal rights and leading to equal access to resources. Whereas Seymour was a proponent of absolute individual liberty in the social sphere, in economics he felt that the individual had to co-operate with others and, in order to maintain liberty, could only do so on the basis of voluntary contract and, above all, in equality. Equality is inescapable for any condition of liberty. However, Seymour's concept is highly specific:

Anarchy is the affirmation of equality. But by equality we do not mean an artificial 'levelling' of natural capacities or any such absurdity as that,

which political charlatans incessantly endeavor to fasten upon us to their own ulterior and dishonest interest. Equality, of course, in a social sense, simply means equal *rights*. And equal rights means the abolition of monopolies. No wonder the monopolists and their hirelings and dupes have discoursed so long and loudly on the ‘impossibilities of equality’. Equality is the death-warrant of a society of thieves.⁵¹

The attack on monopoly and the advocacy of extensive ownership, leading to the particular concept of equality, drew the individualists into an assault on the institutions of power and the advocacy of revolutionary change.

Revolution, politics and the state

The one thing that united individualists and communists is untrammelled hostility to the state as an agent of class rule and the protector of injustice. Its very nature turns it into an instrument of violence, as Seymour wrote: ‘the whole and sole end and aim of government is the defence of capitalism, or in other words, the monopoly of wealth.’⁵² Tarn’s analysis is more complex and he augments political economy with a wider critique demolishing the argument for the existence of government by consent. Tarn saw the state as being based on two interrelated principles, authority and submission.

The state was formed ostensibly to protect the weak. Paradoxically, that was to be achieved through their submission to the strong and it ‘gave the strong its heart’s desire’.⁵³ That submission was rarely voluntary. It was imposed by force and sanctified by law and religion. ‘Thus Government and Marriage are Divine, both resting upon social power acquired in an age of brute force.’ So the question arose, ‘How can we defend ourselves against our defenders?’⁵⁴

For Tarn, the fact that government is not voluntary is axiomatic; there is no government by consent.

When was the organisation formed, and when did I consent to become a member of it? The answer in each case is NEVER! Before I had time to look about me on entering the world, I became registered as a subject of the State – i.e., the Government. Then I was compulsorily vaccinated, next compulsorily educated, and now I am compulsorily robbed and bullied.⁵⁵

The origin of all government is the love of power, disguised by rationalizations to make it acceptable.⁵⁶ Government is profoundly dysfunctional, ‘For Government is force, and force is the enemy of reason’.⁵⁷ Not only that, but the state is also an agent of petty interference based on other people’s prejudices. The temperance movement was a focus of much of his anger.

Acts that they dared not do themselves they think they are justified in getting State officials to do for them ... Few teetotallers dare come to me and prevent me drinking a glass of ale, yet the sneaking humbugs will prevent me through the agency of the State ... The disposition on the part of faddists to seek to force their fads down other people's throats through the agency of the State, is one of the worst signs of the times.⁵⁸

And echoing current debates about binge drinking in Britain, he argued:

Were our licensing system abolished ... it is highly probable that drunkenness might temporarily increase, owing to men's power of self-control being destroyed by coercion. But in the end it would doubtless lead to far more general temperance, and indeed it is probably the only way whereby the drunkenness of our towns can be permanently diminished.⁵⁹

The debilitating effects of state regulation on the individual is one of the constant themes of individualist thought. In twenty-first century neo-liberal ideology it tends to be expressed as 'dependency culture'. However, there is a key distinction between this type of thinking and the individualist anarchists. Advocates of dependency culture describe the adverse effects of what they see as an over-generous, kindly, though misguided, state. As a result, they feel that it is in the best interest of the individual for the ever-benign state to withhold welfare benefits and encourage self-reliance, a process described in the United States as 'tough love'. The individualist anarchist would see this as a charade, an expression of the greed of the rulers in withholding from the workers the return of a small portion of what has been stolen from them in rent, interest, taxes and profit. It is a way of punishing the poor for their poverty, depressing wages, and is an act of violence, removing the means of support from the weakest without the provision of any alternative other than low-paid exploitative labour. In this form, self-reliance is a pretence that covers robbery. Individual self-reliance cannot exist without the economic reforms of free currency, universal property rights, mutualist exchange and the abolition of the source of all oppression, the ever-malign state.

The very idea that the state can be other than an expression of class rule and a legitimizer of exploitation is anathema to individualist anarchists. Tarn is explicit that the workers are mistaken to call for the state to rectify the wrongs done to them. This is simply the 'perpetuation of the instrument of their oppression'.⁶⁰ So, for Tarn, 'The question for each of us to ask himself is this – "shall I be forced or shall I be free?" ... The new and really revolutionary idea is that men shall not be forced at all.'⁶¹

For Henry Seymour, in particular, revolution was necessary and imminent. However, it is easy to misunderstand precisely what Seymour advocated as his rhetoric breaks the chains of his intended meaning. His

cod psychology also intervenes. In *The Revolutionary Review*, he seemed to suggest that the cause of revolutions is thunderstorms. This is because 'One of the unmistakable revelations of the new psychology is that certain atmospheric densities produce insanity, wars, suicides, epidemics of crime, a spirit of revolt, & etc.'⁶² Elsewhere he extends the metaphor: 'the storm clouds of revolution are hovering about our heads ... Behold! the red horizon forbodes [sic] a reign of blood.'⁶³ His penchant for bloodthirsty language and vivid overstatement hides the fact that what he was calling for is a peaceful economic revolution, which would bring in its wake a social revolution.

The adoption of the word 'revolution' was simply the way that Seymour distinguished himself from other advocates of gradualist change. He was explicit about the rejection of political violence. Physical force is only permissible in self-defence. Seymour wrote that 'Force is or never need be more than incident to revolution. It is no necessary counterpart of it. In fact, aggressive revolution is only political method disguised.'⁶⁴ He argued that poverty and oppression lead to a lack of education and diminishing of reason; this, in turn, results in a desire for vengeance against the oppressors. The desire for revenge is much more likely to ensure 'the ultimate establishment, in the name of liberty, of a still more despotic Power than the Revolutionists sought to overturn'.⁶⁵ It is the denial of 'politics' or, more accurately, political systems, that is the foundation of both economic and individual liberty. As a result, he also rejected democracy:

The Ballot Box is a 'lottery' – a remnant of that middle-age superstition – trial by ordeal, in which, whether this or that party wins, the people always lose. It is a tool with which political tricksters compell [sic] the people to accept the responsibilities of their crimes.⁶⁶

Later on, Seymour quoted the Christian anarchist, John Morrison Davidson, approvingly: elections were 'a choice of one or two thieves between whom the people are crucified'.⁶⁷

This absolutist position on the state meant that Seymour, like Tarn, utterly rejected state socialism. He ridiculed the idea that the collective power of the state might be used to protect the weak. The state is by its nature strong and therefore its role in state socialism, where it would be given a monopoly of force, would be to protect the weak from itself – an obvious absurdity. As an individualist, he rejected the idea that the state could represent an inclusive collective interest for two reasons. First, such an interest does not exist, the sovereignty of the individual is absolute; and secondly, the power of the state will always rest in the hands of the people who control it and, as such, they will always operate state machinery in their own interests. The state will always crush those that seek to assert their rights as 'to give people their rights involves the abolition of the

privileges and class-supremacy of political government. Justice can only come from individual economic independence'.⁶⁸ This cannot be established through political organization, only through economic action. Fundamental to this is the development of mutualist systems of exchange.

The first stage of this economic revolution would be the abandonment of gold as the source of monetary value, opening up currency to free competition. It would then be possible to move towards a 'rational' paper money secured against 'every conceivable species of non-perishable market value'.⁶⁹ Rather than have convertibility against gold, currency would be convertible against the products of labour. As a result, the only limit to the availability of credit would be the capacity of the worker.

The second stage of Seymour's revolution would be the organization, by the workers themselves, of systems of equitable production and exchange. By engaging in free and open competition, the market would then work to increase wealth. Conventionally understood free markets and free trade are nothing of the sort as they are distorted by monopoly power.

Revolutionary action is not political; it is educational, raising the awareness of the workers of their power and their possibilities. Once that awareness had developed, 'the first move in the direction of Anarchy would naturally assume the shape of an Organization of CREDIT, LABOR, and EXCHANGE.'⁷⁰ Initially Seymour felt that this would be sufficient to initiate revolution.

The organization of labor in free competition with capital will eventually turn the government bankrupt, for whether this or that party holds the national reins, the capitalist *always* rules. The Anarchist doesn't want to speedily abolish government with dynamite, but simply proposes to starve out the State on business principles.⁷¹

Later Seymour advocated more forcible methods of collective action to augment mutualist self-organization: 'The next step would be an organized resistance to the landlord – a flat refusal to pay rent. If this is done on a sufficiently grand scale, the State would collapse of itself.'⁷²

The effectiveness of this strategy to effect a total social and economic revolution must be in doubt; certainly the individualist anarchists did not succeed as educators. There is little evidence of workers heeding their advice. There is, however, one tantalizing leaflet in the Nettlau collection at the IISH in Amsterdam. A Mr G. Bonham of 7 Shrewsbury Road, Bayswater issued an undated handbill in around 1890. Entitled *Free Co-operation*, it sought to found an association to find premises for 'direct trade without profit' and a meeting room for business. It stated:

Through liberty and co-operation the world may yet be saved from much of the misery which will attend the approaching industrial collapse that

threatens it, and which may end in the sacking of cities and universal carnage.⁷³

It is impossible to say whether anything came of this initiative but it did show that there was some activity generated by individualist anarchism, though not on anything like the same scale as that stimulated by the anarchist communists and syndicalists. Mr Bonham clearly failed to save the world, though for at least trying he deserves this small stake in posterity.

Sex and society – the emancipation of the individual

When it comes to the issue of individual liberty and sexual and social emancipation, all anarchists – as well as some liberals and socialists – are seemingly individualists. All celebrate the liberty that will flow from their particular version of social justice. The basis of the radical critique of marriage is a rejection of domination through the rendering of one person as the property of another. The inalienable right to own and control one's own body and sexuality became the cornerstone of a growing feminist movement. The idea of free union, unregulated by law and without the sanctification of religion, united individualists, communists and freethinkers. Those influenced by egoism added their own twist by asserting the absolute autonomy of the individual. Whatever the differences in nuance, all agreed that the economic emancipation of the worker had to be accompanied by the social liberation of the individual.

For Seymour, 'there is no liberty which is not individual liberty'⁷⁴ and such liberty can only exist in an absolute equality of rights.

The fundamental claim of Anarchism, or equal, individual liberty, is then the right of any individual to do exactly as he or she pleases, with one simple provision: that in the exercise of this right, the similar or equal right of every other individual is properly respected.⁷⁵

This is more libertarian than Mill's famous harm principle, as it makes no moral judgement of actions but only demands reciprocity. This is not the reciprocity of rights and duties much favoured by communitarian theorists. In fact, some individualists rejected the notion of duty itself. The most eloquent attack comes from Seymour's collaborator in the Free Currency Propaganda, John Badcock, who, unsurprisingly given his Stirnerite sympathies, goes further than Seymour. For Badcock, duty is merely a device of rulers to ensure personal compliance with something

disagreeable or oppressive. It is an unwanted and, at times, dangerous sense of obligation.

Nelson is debited with saying 'England expects every man to do his duty'. This expectation reckons upon the superstition and ignorance of the masses, and enables the governing classes to have a stronger hold over the classes beneath them than they otherwise would have.⁷⁶

Badcock shows the influence of Stirner again in saying that what people, including other anarchists, saw as a duty of working for others and as acts of self-denial were, in fact, acts of self-gratification. This echoes John Henry Mackay's celebrated fictionalized description of Charlotte Wilson as the woman who left behind a life of privilege to unconsciously follow 'the call of her own happiness', not to serve 'the cause of humanity', as she believed.⁷⁷ This is not to denigrate people's actions but to identify that the search for individual happiness is both powerful and positive. However, self-sacrifice is no more than individual choice and must never be ossified into dogma. Badcock's conclusion is firmly egoistic:

The only way to escape from bondage is to deny all rights and duties whatsoever. Look to self-interest *direct* for the attainment of your ends, and you will see that all the good things in life, all harmonious relationships you cling to, will be preserved *because you like them*.⁷⁸

This may seem to mirror the amorality of the 1980s 'greed is good' mentality, but the reality is that the individualist anarchists favoured the pursuit of self-interest in a society which was structured in such a way as to prevent exploitation, rather than one where it can be gratified only through the intensification of exploitation, by gaining wealth at the expense of others. Self-interest is only universally functional in a free society. John Basil Barnhill elaborated on these themes in his journal, *The Eagle and the Serpent*, published between 1898 and 1903. The paper boldly announced its 'Creed and Aim' as

A race of altruists is necessarily a race of slaves.
A race of freemen is necessarily a race of egoists.
Freedom cannot be granted. It must be taken.

To convert the exploiters to altruism is a fatuous programme – a maniac's dream. The only remedy for social injustice is this: the exploited must save themselves by enlightened self-interest. The exploiters are certainly egoistic enough; the only hope for the exploited is for them to become equally so – yes, consistently, persistently egoistic. Egoism spells justice and freedom as surely as altruism spells charity and slavery.⁷⁹

Social change simply occurs through the oppressed refusing to be so and using whatever power necessary to enforce their self-interest. 'The majority of the exploited are content to be exploited. If they can be taught to know what justice is and to want it, they will demand and get justice and not have to go whining for alms and charity.'⁸⁰

In an attempt to win interest, letters and copies of the journal were sent to many prominent radicals, but the response showed its limited impact. Kropotkin was 'too busy'⁸¹ to respond, George Bernard Shaw gave a backhanded recommendation: 'The journal ... promises to be sufficiently foolish to make people think',⁸² whilst Seymour engaged in more eccentricity – egoists 'lack a fullness in the upper portions of the cerebrum, while the cerebrum is well developed'.⁸³

The journal's approach to gender was particularly interesting. In an article headed 'Why Women Need Egoism', it argued that women were double victims of altruism. Marital duties are an expression of altruism at its worst, designed to ensure the husband's ease, and even the most altruistic man becomes an egoist with his wife. As a result,

Disappointed altruists who desire to be healthy, beautiful, happy and wise will find in egoism their only salvation because it teaches self-knowledge. Woman will learn to get hold of herself, to be her own guide. When she becomes clear-sighted through a rational way of living, she will discern where her duties lie. The duties of an egoistic woman lie in the same direction of an egoistic man, namely, first to make herself happy and secondly to make others happy. No egoistic woman will give a gift unless she has received one of equal value. She will make no one happy unless she is made happy likewise.⁸⁴

Whether it is of 'altruism' or duty, this critique points to the other main theme in individualist writing, the removal of legal restraint on sexual relationships. Henry Seymour was a supporter of the work of 'advanced' thinkers on sex and his arguments were based, as always, on his libertarianism and his faith in 'scientific' understandings of human nature. Seymour's view of marriage was straightforward: 'Marriage destroys love through property.'⁸⁵ The intervention of law into sexual relations has made women the property of men and in doing so has not only enslaved women, but also destroyed any affection that lay underneath the commitment. He argued both for economic independence for women and their 'release from domestic slavery' through 'the abolition of the marriage laws'.⁸⁶ Economic emancipation of the workers would mean nothing without the release of women from the ownership of men.

However, Seymour then went one step further, attacking the social taboos of Victorian society by demanding the demystification of sex and its removal from the context of sin. 'The sexual organs ... require the

same liberty of exercise as any other organ of the body. Abstinence is productive of as many evils as excess.⁸⁷ The mystification of sex is in itself psychologically destructive, 'breeding fear',⁸⁸ whilst the 'silly sanctities of virginity'⁸⁹ simply reflect the property base of marriage and are solely a way of enhancing women's market value. However, Seymour could not wholly escape the prejudices of his age. Following on from his feminist statements, he lapses into the more conventional view that sexual repression produces the 'peculiar diseases of women – prostitution, masturbation, and licentiousness in general'.⁹⁰

Actually, Seymour seemed to be rather attracted to licentiousness. He wrote like the most devoted swinger. As an early advocate of polyamory, he viewed sexual jealousy as 'an ignorant and despotic prejudice worthy only of reprehension and rebuke' based on 'a presupposition of property in human beings'.⁹¹ In *The Revolutionary Review*, he took on Lothrop Withington's defence of monogamy, arguing for voluntary polygamy and polyandry. He favoured 'the observance of variety in sexual intercourse, for reasons in accord with science' and dogmatically asserted, 'the one-love theory ... is narrow and exclusive and begets narrow mindedness. It is not adapted to our sexual requirements: change is essential'.⁹² His collaborator, John Badcock, was far more thoughtful in his pamphlet, *When Love is Liberty and Nature Law*.⁹³ He argued that the basis of friendship is equality and that relationships can never be successful where one partner subjugates the other. As a result, 'perfect equality between man and woman is only possible when neither has a legal claim upon the other'.⁹⁴ He therefore advocated self-regulated partnership agreements, if necessary enforced through private insurance companies. This is far more succinctly argued than Seymour's wild attack on monogamy and, arguably, more in tune with reality.

One of the more delightful items of ephemera in the Nettlau collection is a beautifully produced *Marriage Protest and Free Union Declaration* by Emma Wardlaw Best and Arthur Wastall. This leaflet, decorated with their suitably solemn photographs, declares that they were going to 'discard the marriage ceremony and form an autonomistic alliance'. In 1897, they actively put these theories into practice and moved to the Seychelles.⁹⁵

Albert Tarn also took up this theme of the relationship between law, religion and sex in his discussion of the nature of freedom in a free society. Together with Seymour and Badcock he rejected marriage, feeling that law destroys love. He summed it up perfectly:

Only in freedom can love thrive. If the birds can live happily in their conjugal relationship without the sanction of priest or State official, why may not human beings? Let the preachers of morality go and read their sermons to the swallows and the tom-tits, and try and convert them from their 'sinful' mode of life.⁹⁶

The contradictions of liberty: Collaboration, conflict and conspiracy

There is a central problem lurking within individualist thought: the potential contradiction between competition and co-operation and its consequences for social cohesion, conflict and peace. Though individualists did not indulge in utopian speculation about the reform of human nature, they did tend to assume that necessary collaboration through the division of labour, production and exchange, together with constraint resulting from rational self-interest in freely entered contractual relationships, will produce broadly peaceable and harmonious societies.

This is certainly true of Seymour, who saw the market as being an agent for the promotion of collaboration. However, Albert Tarn is more circumspect. Tarn had already identified, through his concept of property, the necessity of self-defence, implicitly highlighting levels of conflict inherent in the idea of free competition. This surfaces in his treatment of crime and his call for a Free Police. Though he does indulge in some arguments about environmental conditioning and the destructive effect of coercion, he is more concerned about how free individuals defend themselves against the attempts by others to take away their freedom. Thus, he can demand 'Liberty for every man to be able to defend himself against all other men, and to associate with others for the purpose of organising protection.'⁹⁷

Tarn located the origin of war with the state, but he did not believe that its removal would necessarily produce a society acting in accordance with Kropotkin's concept of the human instinct for mutual aid. By accepting competition, he assumed that conflict would continue and that it needed to be contained by self-defence. This is an area of profound ambiguity. On the one hand it is consistent. On the other, in the twenty-first century, it has to be read with a sense of unease. The example of paranoid and, at times, dangerous political movements does not give confidence that conflict can be resolved purely through self-defence. The possibility of such a free society being a deeply violent one cannot be excluded. The individualist anarchists have to rely on a belief that there will be a mutual recognition of individual rights, but this aspect of their thought was seized upon by their communist critics who saw social solidarity as one of the essential elements of a free society.

Tarn, however, was confident in his advocacy of absolute individual liberty. In economics it meant free credit through 'free competition in the supply of capital to labour'; 'free access to land and the minerals beneath it'; 'perfect freedom of importation and exportation'; 'equal liberty and opportunity for all to engage in any industry whatsoever' (including the medical profession, in line with the orthodoxy within the anti-vaccination movement); all underpinned by a free currency.⁹⁸ In social

affairs, the principle is straightforward: 'Freedom of individual judgement in all matters, so long as the individual does not trespass on the liberty of others.'⁹⁹ Thus, Tarn concluded: 'Anarchy is a condition of society in which each individual would remain in full control of his or her time, person and results of labor.'¹⁰⁰

Apart from the potential for violent conflict, there is a dark side to some individualist thought. For example, Henry Seymour dabbled in conspiracy theory, asserting that the Jack the Ripper murders were carried out by paid Jesuit police agents to force the resignation of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, a belief that remained unshaken by the continuance of the murders after the resignation had taken place.¹⁰¹ Later, after he ceased being active in anarchism, he edited *Baconiana*, a journal mainly devoted to proving that the works of Shakespeare were written by Francis Bacon. Despite Seymour being in deadly earnest, these claims can be seen as harmless eccentricities. More disturbing was his anti-Semitism.

Once again, anti-Semitic sentiments reappear, as they so often do. Barnhill was an honourable exception to this tendency, using the front page of the June 1900 issue of his journal to launch a prominent attack on anti-Semitism. However, Seymour had no such reservations. For example, he wrote of the 'will and whim of a parasitic race of Shylocks',¹⁰² whilst Lothrop Withington could always be relied on to reach greater rhetorical lows: 'The old rent-robbing aristocracy, feeling sick unto death, throws itself into the arms of the Israelitish [sic] blood suckers ... our villainous Jew wreckers of industry...'¹⁰³ Seymour also indulged in the commonplace and deeply ingrained association of Jews with finance capital and usury, the target of much of his political economy. It is a small move from a politics that identifies finance capital as the enemy to one that sees Jews or some form of Jewish conspiracy as the cause of our discontents. Thankfully, there is no sign that individualists in general took that step and anti-Semitism did not become central to their critique of capitalism as it did in fascism.

These unsavoury sentiments need to be contextualized, not to excuse them, but in order to provide a critique of currents in contemporary radicalism. Seymour's are not merely quaint nineteenth-century beliefs; they are persistent flaws. For example, in the twenty-first century conspiracy theories abound. Climate change denial is a near-universal belief amongst right libertarians, the 9/11 'Truth' Movement has attracted even mainstream figures to its fringes, whilst much contemporary, obsessive anti-Zionism bears the distinctive stamp of older anti-Semitic discourses. These ideas may not be central, but they are a distasteful and dangerous intellectual baggage that needs jettisoning. Open discussion and historical exploration is a necessity if ever we are to banish this poisonous legacy from radical thought.

Individualist anarchism and its rivals

The prominence of individualist anarchism in late nineteenth-century Britain is reflected in the literature of the time. It was seen as a serious rival to anarchist communism. *Freedom*, maybe with Seymour fresh in the editorial board's mind, took it seriously enough to launch their first issue with a prominent attack on individualist anarchism.¹⁰⁴ Elsewhere, the pain of the strained personal relationships caused by the divergence of the two is dramatically captured by John Henry Mackay in his novel *The Anarchists*,¹⁰⁵ based on his experiences in London in the 1880s and used as a vehicle for expressing his own individualist views.

The debate over individualism was strong, though often comradely, with each side offering the other a platform. However, this was more than a contest of ideas; it was a struggle to claim exclusivity, denying the other the right to use the name anarchist. *Freedom* was ever critical, even though it welcomed Tarn's newspaper. In 1892, for example, it published an editorial about Tucker and Tarn. Entitled *Individualism, Anarchism and Socialism*, it concluded:

Individualists certainly they are, to the extent of considering society as a mere numerical addition of individual units. But certainly they are not Anarchists. ... What individualists advocate is but a system of petty monopoly: industrial, commercial and financial companies ... struggling against each other, the stronger prevailing over the weaker, the richer over the poorer, the first over the latecomer. This leads us necessarily to the constitution of government 'to keep the peace'. To think that there may be, as Tucker claims, unrestricted competition between men enjoying equal opportunities and equal social chances, is sheer contradiction. If there be real equality in society, competition is not possible; and if there be competition, then equality will soon be gone. Individualists lack the fundamental principle of Socialism and Anarchism – solidarity.¹⁰⁶

Freedom was not on its own; *The Torch* reports Merlino, speaking at a meeting to commemorate the Paris Commune on 17 March 1893, as saying that,

we Anarchist Communists have nothing in common with the Individualist Anarchists; these latter were in favour of private property and the wage system, and in what they were pleased to call voluntary government ... in fact they were in favour of the two most opposite things, Anarchism, which means complete liberty, and private property, which means oppression.¹⁰⁷

Given the hostility to the wage system shown by both Spencerian individualists and individualist anarchists alike, this is a staggering misrepresentation, which has been carried thoughtlessly through to the present. Peter Marshall, in one of the few mentions of the individualists in his lengthy history of anarchism, says: '... they retain the profit motive and the wage system.'¹⁰⁸

Other contemporary critics included Agnes Henry, who wrote:

The fact that the individual cannot by himself satisfy his own needs – forces him ... to associate and cooperate with his fellows. Under which circumstances he is obliged to restrain many of his individualist inclinations ... Consequently Individualist Anarchism leads inevitably in the end to Communism.¹⁰⁹

There is nothing inevitable about this non sequitur at all. It also ignores the fact that Seymour was quite clearly outlining a political economy that *would* enable individuals to co-operate on an equitable basis. Max Nettlau gave a more thoughtful critique:

Competition in matters of daily bread makes life insupportable, a continuous race and reckless crushing of the weaker and good-natured by the stronger or brutal and callous – and to this end Individualist Anarchism of the Tuckerian school would come. Competition in other matters, better named emulation, is an element of progress. And why is competition good in one case and bad in the other case? Because in one case it possesses the basis essential to all progress; in the other case not. This basis is FREEDOM. Competition as to daily bread is *compulsory competition*; competition in other matters is *voluntary competition*.¹¹⁰

This is a pertinent point particularly if, as Tarn might suggest, those competing individuals are armed. More seriously, the issue of security from want is a weakness in individualist thinking. It assumes that a free economy and free competition, given equal access to resources and extensive property rights, would produce economic equilibrium rather than winners and losers. It also assumes that all can and will produce, enforced by necessity. However, it is surely stretching the point for Nettlau to conclude: 'We reject the so-called *individualist* Anarchism as authoritarian and coercive.'¹¹¹

The individualists fought back equally unreasonably; for example, William Gilmour wrote:

Indeed it may be said that to prefix the word Anarchist to that of Communism is altogether paradoxical ... Therefore, the *real* Anarchists are determined at all hazards to defend their right of priority to the title. Communism ... is, in its essence, government.¹¹²

John Armsden, in his contribution to James Tochatti's excellent *The Why I Ams* series, supported this by arguing that even if communism could be established it still has to be managed and that there could be 'a certain amount of administrative despotism'.¹¹³

The openness of the theoretical debate points to the fact that this split was not the same as the poisonous schisms that have bedevilled the left. An anonymous communist handbill in the Nettlau archive (taken from the *Reformers' Year Book* and republished in several editions of *Freedom* in 1902) captures this spirit precisely.

It would only be fair to state that the Individualist school of Anarchism, which includes many eminent writers and thinkers, differs from us mainly on the question of Communism ... Anarchism, however, affords the opportunity for experiment in all these matters, and in that sense there is no dispute between us.¹¹⁴

John Henry Mackay dramatised precisely this through a debate between his two protagonists Auban and Trupp, when Auban, the individualist, eventually won the concession from the communist Trupp that communism would not be enforced on mutualists.¹¹⁵ However, the novel does end with their estrangement, perhaps symbolic of anarchism's diverging paths. Most importantly, Trupp won the debate within the movement and this mirrors precisely what happened to individualism in Britain.

Individualist anarchism offered a distinctive anti-statist perspective. Property was to be extensively owned and monopoly overthrown, that very ownership would return the full value of labour to the labourer and would allow free market exchanges using a mutually agreed currency, self-interest would be expressed and restrained through contract, whilst free sexual relationships, gender equality and the overthrow of plutocracy would be central. Above all, it offered the economic autonomy and social liberty of the individual as the guarantee of wider freedom against what individualists saw as the tyranny of the collective. What is more, it engendered debate and adherents in Britain at a pivotal time in the development of radical ideas. Yet, rather than be seen as an important element of the radical milieu of late nineteenth-century Britain, it disappeared from view. Why should this be so?

Firstly, individualism had little support within the working class. Its dislike of trade unionism as anti-individual hardly endeared it to working-class organizations. Its position on property and the free market was open to misinterpretation and smacked of closet conservatism. There is an intriguing indication of class divisions within the Nettlau archive. There was a long-running exchange of letters about anarchism in the *Hull News* for 1892 and Nettlau collected the cuttings. One correspondent, J. Sketchley, explained that there were two 'great schools' of anarchism:

individualists, consisting mainly of the 'well to do classes', and communists, supported by the working classes.¹¹⁶

Additionally, individualism did not offer easy or instant solutions. Neither did it have romantic appeal. Universal self-employment and free exchange hardly stirred the blood in the same way as calls for a cathartic, triumphant revolution. John Henry Mackay describes this superbly in his novel. As he wrote of the audience listening to the rhetoric of the communist Trupp and being won over to the communist cause, 'They longed for the perfection of happiness – Trupp offered it to them'.¹¹⁷ Individualism, in spite of Seymour's vivid prose, did nothing of the sort.

Finally, and crucially, individualism faced a pincer movement from the challenge of new forms of collective power on both the right and the left. As corporate capitalism advanced, the possibility of moving towards a society of independent producers diminished rapidly and spaces for self-organization shrank. Workers saw the need for their own collective institutions to assert their rights against corporate capitalism. Simultaneously, the idea of the state, transformed by the democratic power of an enfranchised working class, as a benign instrument of collective advancement and protection was growing, with an embryonic welfare state coming into being. It was the beginning of the 'strange death of liberal England'. Individualism looked increasingly anachronistic.

Communist anarchism could survive as the libertarian wing of a broader revolutionary socialist movement. Later it was to draw strength from its opposition to totalitarianism, being the first segment of the left to see that the Russian Revolution had ushered in a new tyranny and not a workers' paradise. But in the later part of the nineteenth century, it was positioning itself as a champion of class struggle against both capitalism and the state, and in the next chapter we will see how British communist anarchism developed inside the late Victorian radical milieu.

Notes

- 1 John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists* (Paladin Books, Granada Publishing: London, Toronto, Sydney and New York, 1978). The book is important and ground-breaking, though Quail was mainly interested in action rather than theory, describing the discussion of theory as 'balls-achingly boring'. For Quail, 'political theory, no matter how worthy or perceptive, is curiously disembodied; it gives no clues to the passions, the heroisms or the squalid conflicts that it inspired'. I hope that this book might be a little more entertaining for the reader (p.x).
- 2 John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse*, p.19. For his discussion of the role of the British individualist Henry Seymour see pp.47–56.

- 3 See Frank H. Brooks (ed.), *The Individualist Anarchists: An Anthology of Liberty (1881–1908)* (Transaction Books: New Brunswick and London, 1994). Carl Watner, 'The English Individualists as They Appear in Liberty', *The Journal of Libertarian Studies* (Vol. VI, No.1, 1982), pp.59–82.
- 4 Max Nettlau, *Anarchism in England Fifty Years Ago*. Supplement to *Freedom*, November–December, 1905, p.38.
- 5 Max Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism*, p.36.
- 6 Ibid p.37.
- 7 A. C. Cuddon, *A Contribution Towards the Elucidation of a Science of Society by a Member of the London Confederation of Rational Reformers* (The London Confederation of Rational Reformers, 1853), p.8.
- 8 See J. M. Robertson, *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century* (Thoemmes Press: Bristol and Sterling, VI, 2001).
- 9 A. C. Cuddon, *A Contribution Towards the Elucidation of the Science of Society*, p.2.
- 10 Ibid p.2.
- 11 Ibid p.2.
- 12 Carl Watner, *The English Individualists as They Appear in Liberty*, p.60.
- 13 *The Herald of Anarchy* (October 1890), p.1.
- 14 Ibid p.1.
- 15 G. W. Foote, *Prisoner for Blasphemy* (Progressive Publishing Company: London, 1886), pp.14–15.
- 16 *The Anarchist*, No.1 (March 1885), p.3.
- 17 *The Anarchist*, No.14 (April 1886), p.1.
- 18 *The Anarchist*, Vol. 2, No.3, 4th year No.37 (March 1888), p.3.
- 19 Henry Seymour, 'The Genesis of Anarchism in England', in Joseph Ishill (ed.), *Free Vistas*, Vol.2 (Oriole Press: Berkley Heights, NJ, 1937), p.125.
- 20 Wilson to Marsh, 28 September, 1896, Marsh Archive, IISH.
- 21 Henry Seymour, *The Physiology of Love: A Study in Stirpiculture* (L. N. Fowler & Co.: London, 1898), p.88.
- 22 Ibid p.101.
- 23 Henry Seymour, 'The Evolution of Intelligence. Psychology considered as a factor in the development of Anarchy', *The Revolutionary Review*, No.8 (August 1889), p.116.
- 24 *The Anarchist*, No.1 (March 1885), p.2.
- 25 L. Susan Brown, *The Politics of Individualism: Liberalism, Liberal Feminism and Anarchism* (Black Rose Books: Montréal, New York and London, 2003).
- 26 Ibid p.118.
- 27 Don Werkheiser, 'Benjamin Tucker: Champion of Free Money', in Michael Coughlin et al. (eds), *Benjamin Tucker and the Champions of Liberty: A*

- Centenary Anthology* (Michael E. Coughlin and Mark Sullivan Publishers: St Paul and New York, 1986), p.212.
- 28 L. Susan Brown, 'Looking Back and Moving Forward: The Radical Humanism of *The Politics of Individualism*', *Anarchist Studies* (Vol. 12, No.1, 2004), pp.9–15, 14.
 - 29 Wendy McElroy, *The Debates of Liberty: An Overview of Individualist Anarchism, 1881–1908* (Lexington Books: Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford, 2003), p.149.
 - 30 Henry Seymour, *An Examination of the Malthusian Theory* (H. Seymour: London, 1889), p.13.
 - 31 Henry Seymour, *Anarchy: Theory and Practice* (H. Seymour: London, 1888), p.6.
 - 32 *The Revolutionary Review* (June 1889), p.83.
 - 33 Henry Seymour, *The Monomaniacs. A Fable in Finance* (repr. from *London Liberty*, printed by James Tochatti: London, 1895).
 - 34 Henry Seymour, *The Fallacy of Marx's Theory of Surplus Value* (Murdoch & Co.: London, 1897).
 - 35 Henry Seymour, *The Philosophy of Anarchism: A Paper read before the London Dialectical Society on October 20, 1886* (International Publishing Company: London, 1887), p.5.
 - 36 *Ibid* p.6.
 - 37 Henry Seymour, *Anarchy: Theory and Practice*, p.7.
 - 38 Albert Tarn, 'Money (By an Individual Anarchist)', *Freedom* (September 1889), p.41.
 - 39 *Ibid* p.41.
 - 40 *Ibid* p.41.
 - 41 Albert Tarn, 'Individual or Common Property?', *Freedom* (December 1889), p.56.
 - 42 *Ibid* p.56.
 - 43 *Freedom* (April 1890), p.18.
 - 44 Albert Tarn, *The State: Its Origin; Its Nature and Its Abolition* (Charles Stocker: Birmingham, n.d.), p.13.
 - 45 *The Herald of Anarchy* (January 1892), p.6.
 - 46 Henry Seymour, *Anarchy: Theory and Practice*, p.5.
 - 47 *The Herald of Anarchy* (October 1890), p.4.
 - 48 *The Herald of Anarchy* (March 1891), p.25.
 - 49 *The Herald of Anarchy* (November 1890), p.1.
 - 50 *Ibid* p.1.
 - 51 *Ibid* p.5.
 - 52 *The Anarchist* (July 1885), p.2.

- 53 Albert Tarn, *The State: Its Origin; Its Nature and Its Abolition*, p.4.
- 54 Ibid p.4.
- 55 Albert Tarn, *The Individual and the State. A Brief Analysis of Political Government* (New Fellowship Press: London, 1891), pp.3–4. The same argument was made by the American Lysander Spooner in *The Constitution of No Authority, No Treason*, No.4 (Boston 1870), <http://www.lysanderspooner.org> (accessed 4 December 2010).
- 56 Ibid p.5.
- 57 Ibid p.7.
- 58 Ibid p.8.
- 59 Ibid p.9.
- 60 Ibid p.9.
- 61 Ibid p.5.
- 62 *The Revolutionary Review* (June 1889), p.82.
- 63 Henry Seymour, *An Examination of the Malthusian Theory*, p.16.
- 64 Henry Seymour, *Anarchy: Theory and Practice*, p.9.
- 65 *The Anarchist* (April 1885), p.2.
- 66 Ibid p.2.
- 67 Ibid p.2.
- 68 Henry Seymour, *The Philosophy of Anarchism*, p.11.
- 69 Henry Seymour, *The Fallacy of Marx's Theory of Surplus Value*, pp.67–8.
- 70 Henry Seymour, *Anarchy: Theory and Practice*, p.10.
- 71 *The Anarchist* (March 1885), p.1.
- 72 Henry Seymour, *Anarchy: Theory and Practice*, p.10.
- 73 G. Bonham, *Free Co-operation* (n.d.), Nettlau Archive 1981 (new numbers) IISH.
- 74 Henry Seymour, *The Philosophy of Anarchism*, p.2.
- 75 Ibid p.3.
- 76 John Badcock, *Slaves to Duty. A Lecture* (William Reeves: London, 1894), p.22.
- 77 John Henry Mackay, *The Anarchists: A Picture of Civilization at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (Autonomedia: New York, 1999), p.28.
- 78 Ibid p.27.
- 79 *The Eagle and the Serpent* (February 1898), p.1.
- 80 Ibid p.4.
- 81 *The Eagle and the Serpent* (June 1898), p.42.
- 82 *The Eagle and the Serpent* (April 1898), p.21.
- 83 *The Eagle and the Serpent* (June 1898), p.47.
- 84 *The Eagle and the Serpent* (February 1899), p.104.

- 85 Henry Seymour, *The Anarchy of Love: or the Science of the Sexes* (H. Seymour, London, 1888), p.6.
- 86 Ibid p.14.
- 87 Ibid p.9.
- 88 Ibid p.13.
- 89 Ibid p.9.
- 90 Ibid p.10.
- 91 Ibid p.4.
- 92 Henry Seymour (writing as Verax), *The Revolutionary Review* (April 1889), p.47.
- 93 John Badcock, Jnr., *When Love is Liberty and Nature Law: A Lecture* (William Reeves: London 1893).
- 94 Ibid p.12.
- 95 *A Marriage Protest and Free Union Declaration*, Nettlau, No. 1981 (new catalogue) IISH.
- 96 Albert Tarn, *The State: Its Origin; Its Nature and Its Abolition*, p.14.
- 97 *The Herald of Anarchy* (March 1891), p.1.
- 98 Ibid p.1.
- 99 Ibid p.1.
- 100 *The Herald of Anarchy* (January 1892), p.3.
- 101 *The Revolutionary Review*, No.2 (February 1889), p.32 and No.9 (September 1889), p.132.
- 102 Henry Seymour, *Anarchy: Theory and Practice*, p.9.
- 103 *The Anarchist* (February 1887), p.3.
- 104 Anon, 'Anarchism Kills Individualism', *Freedom* (October 1886), p.2.
- 105 John Henry Mackay, *The Anarchists*.
- 106 'Individualism, Anarchism and Socialism', *Freedom* (April 1892), p.29.
- 107 *The Torch* (15 April 1893), p.2.
- 108 Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (Harper Collins: London, 1992), p.653.
- 109 Agnes Henry, *Anarchist Communism in its Relation to State Socialism* (James Tochatti, Liberty Press: London, 1896), pp.3–4.
- 110 Commonweal Anarchist Group – Authorship attributed to Max Nettlau in hand-written inscription by A. Hamon inside the front cover of the edition held by IISH, *Why we are Anarchists* (William Reeves: London, 1894), p.17 (wrongly printed, should be p.11).
- 111 Ibid p.12.
- 112 William Gilmour, *The Creed of Liberty: A Brief Exposition of Philosophical Anarchism* (Circle Co-operative (T.U.) Printers' Society: London, 1895), pp.2–3.

- 113 J. Armsden, 'Why I am an Individualist Anarchist', in Conrad Naewiger, George Bernard Shaw, J. Armsden, *The Why I Ams: Why I am a Socialist and an Atheist, Why I am a Social Democrat, Why I am an Individualist Anarchist* (James Tochatti, Liberty Press: London, 1894), p.13.
- 114 Anon, *Anarchist Communism – Its Aims and Principles* (Freedom Printery, London, n.d.), Nettlau 311 (old catalogue) IISH.
- 115 John Henry Mackay, *The Anarchists*, pp.89–91.
- 116 J. Sketchley, *Hull News* (3 May 1892), Nettlau 311 (old catalogue) IISH.
- 117 John Henry Mackay, *The Anarchists*, p.148.