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BOOK REVIEWS

Samuel Edward Konkin III: Revolutionary Friend

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Samuel Edward Konkin III: Revolutionary Friend
Wendy McElroy
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The libertarian movement is home to quite a few eccentric and radical people. Among them, only a few attract a following and impact the movement fundamentally. Samuel Edward Konkin III (1947–2004), or SEK3, as he is often called, was one such figure—a true radical whose writings and activism made, and continue to make, a real impact on the movement as well as on libertarian thought and strategy generally. Indeed, SEK3, the author of the *New Libertarian Manifesto* (Konkin [1980] 1983), was the founder of agorism and the originator of countereconomics.

I discovered and read SEK3's works in the early 2000s, and his ideas immediately made an important impact on my own thinking (see, e.g., Bylund [2006] 2021). Specifically, I soon adopted the radical, antipolitics, and no-bullshit market anarchist position of agorism (and consider myself an agorist to this day). I also found Konkin's countereconomics—a real-world, workable libertarian strategy that combines practicing what you preach, leading by example, and no longer feeding the beast—to be a beautiful and simple, if not obvious (at least in retrospect), way of putting libertarian principles into effective practice.

It was therefore thrilling to see that the Agorist Nexus published a book on Konkin, written by libertarian luminary Wendy McElroy. Rather than a biography or summary of his philosophy, McElroy presents a personal historical sketch of both the man and his legacy. A longtime personal friend of Konkin, as well as a onetime inhabitant of the famed Anarcho-Village in

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Long Beach, California, McElroy recalls personal anecdotes, gives piercing insight into the person "Sam" (as she fondly calls him), and discusses the history, evolution, and impact of his ideas.

The book consists of seven chapters. The first two address the meaning of the Anarcho-Village, a sixteen-year "social experiment" in which a small cadre of libertarians inhabited a "run-down apartment complex and an adjacent house" (19), and how the community came to be. The significance of the Anarcho-Village is that it was a "writers colony" as well as a libertarian activist community. The inhabitants published newsletters and wrote and published a large number of books. Among the Anarcho-Villagers were author and publisher Victor Koman, who runs the KoPubCo imprint that publishes SEK3's writings; author J. Neil Schulman, who penned the agorist classic *Alongside Night* in the Anarcho-Village; and Wendy McElroy herself. The Anarcho-Village also served as a blueprint to be copied elsewhere to form what SEK3 called a new libertarian alliance, a network of "villages" with the purpose of "defend[ing] the Agorist community and its members against the state" (27).

Chapter 3 tells the story of agorism primarily through the themes of Konkin's ([1986] 2008) *An Agorist Primer,* following its chapters. While we learn much about the philosophy and how it can be understood as an application of core insights from sound (Austrian) economics, we also learn about SEK3 as its originator and primary proponent. As McElroy begins the chapter, "SEK3's life was dedicated to one ideal: Agorism. This is the political philosophy and movement he created; it is the future he believed in so deeply that it consumed his life" (49).

Chapter 4 deals with the issue of state-granted monopoly privileges over creations of the mind, so-called intellectual property. Konkin (like agorists in general) was strongly against not only the state but also what it causes or creates. As an author and publisher, he vocally opposed copyrights (calling them "copywrongs"); he maintained that "ideas can be privately owned but only if they are kept *private* or protected by contract" (73). His position was that, contrary to private property in things, so-called intellectual property is neither scarce nor rivalrous and is therefore not subject to contradictory claims and conflict. Consequently, the free market would not generate institutions to socialize the costs of protecting it.

Chapter 5 makes explicit the link between Konkin, his life and philosophy, and science fiction. Not only did he have great interest in science fiction as a reader, writer, and publisher, but he was also a fan activist. In fact, he "immersed himself in frefandom" (his term for being a libertarian science fiction fan) and "embraced SF as a means by which to revolutionize society" (93, 94). Konkin was a member and founder of science fiction clubs and

published fan publications. McElroy explains not only how this interest in "SF" shaped Konkin's ideas, but also how science fiction is relevant to libertarianism and to the libertarian movement.

Chapter 6 discusses the now-(in)famous debate and falling out between Konkin and "Mr. Libertarian," Murray N. Rothbard, which "erupted" (134) in 1980 following controversy about party-political activism after the founding of the Libertarian Party in 1971. Naturally, SEK3 was a radical libertarian anarchist and thus a Rothbardian through and through. But agorism arguably goes further than Rothbard ever did (or wanted to), which is why Konkin referred to his philosophy as more Rothbardian than Rothbard himself was. Part of what made Rothbard a lesser Rothbardian, so to speak, and a major cause of friction between Konkin and Rothbard, is agorism's principled rejection of political parties and party politics. Konkin had nothing but disdain for "partyarchs" (his term for members of the Libertarian Party) and consequently found Rothbard's involvement in the Libertarian Party contemptible. This is certainly part of what caused the split, but it is not the full picture. In this intriguing chapter, McElroy elaborates on the aspects and development of this "great divide" between the two radicals, recapitulating an important and consequential episode in the history of the libertarian movement.

Whereas chapter 6 both delivers important insight necessary for understanding the evolution of the libertarian movement over the past several decades and explains the distinction between agorism and anarcho-capitalism, the topic of the seventh and final chapter should be important for contemporary libertarians and the future of the movement. However, it is also the most confusing of the book's chapters.

In chapter 7, McElroy focuses on arguing against the claim by modern-day "left libertarians," including and specifically the Alliance of the Libertarian Left (ALL; full disclosure: I am and have long been aligned with the alliance), that SEK3 is an "intellectual predecessor"/"forerunner" or even "founder"/"father" (McElroy's terms) of the alliance and its core values. It is the claim of "founder"/"father" that irks McElroy, and she goes to great lengths to find and discuss differences between SEK3 and left libertarians.

Some of these differences are explicated by quotes from libertarians associated with ALL (among them Sheldon Richman, Roderick Long, and David D'Amato). Although many of the quotes indeed suggest differences, it is not always clear to what extent they are the respective author's personal arguments, interpretations, or extensions of SEK3's philosophy, or a representative view of the ALL. But there are other problematic claims that are presented without support, such as the repeated claim that many left libertarians are Georgists and (therefore?) proponents of a land tax. As the

imposition of a tax should require a state, which is necessarily incompatible with market anarchism (including left libertarianism), the claim appears odd and is missing the requisite elaboration and explanation.

To bring home the point that SEK3 is not the "founder" or "father" of left libertarianism, the chapter also attempts to align agorism more closely with Rothbardian anarcho-capitalism in order to make the distance between agorism and left libertarianism stand out. But as it directly follows chapter 6, which explains the "great divide" between Konkin and Rothbard, this line of argument does not strengthen the author's case but instead suggests a tension that raises questions.

In the end, chapter 7, which is by far the longest in the book, ends up not making a persuasive case. McElroy nevertheless concludes that SEK3 was "merely a strong influence upon" and not "a founder of Left Libertarianism" (186). This may indeed be true for ALL, despite, as McElroy notes earlier in the book, SEK3's excitement about Rothbard's outreach to the radical left, which SEK3 continued on behalf of agorism under the name Movement (not Alliance) of the Libertarian Left.

There is much to like about McElroy's personal and insightful historical sketch of SEK3, which elucidates an important libertarian thinker-activist as well as a formative episode in the history of the libertarian movement. Unfortunately, the book's readability suffers from sloppy copyediting. For example, there are some statements that are entirely unnecessarily repeated (how many times does the reader need to be told that the plural form of "frefan" is "frefen" or that Schulman is a sci-fi author?), and quite a few words are hyphenated with a single letter on one page and the rest of the word on the following page. There are also issues with spacing and margins. Let us hope that an updated version fixes these admittedly minor issues.

Overall, *Samuel Edward Konkin III: Revolutionary Friend* is a great read: entertaining, personal, and informative. I warmly recommend it to libertarians anywhere.

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