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The Individualist and society

Victor Serge

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The word society is synonymous with a group. Today most men constitute an immense grouping that, though subdivided into an infinite number of sub-groups (races, nationalities, social classes, ideological groups) can nevertheless be considered as a whole. It is this whole, this formidable collectivity that we designate with the word society.

To consider society as an assemblage of individuals and to deny this any importance, as some do, is simplistic, too simplistic. It means failing to understand social psychology, the psychology of crowds and, what is most surprising, the results of the most elementary observations. In truth, observation shows us and study confirms that from the fact that they find themselves brought together through interests, aspirations, or similar heredity, men are modified. A new psychology is created, common to all the members of the association. From this point they constitute a crowd, and that crowd has a mentality, a life, a destiny distinct from the individuals that compose it.

The existence of a society is thus ruled by laws as immutable as those of biology that rule the existence of individuals.

Let us now pose the question: are these laws favorable to the individual? Are they in harmony with his instincts?

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In an excellent little "*Precis de Sociologie*" M. G. Palante wrote: "A society, once formed, tends to maintain itself," by virtue of which, "in all domains – economic, political, legal, moral – individual energies will be narrowly subordinated to common utility. Woe on those energies that do not bow before that discipline. Society breaks or eliminates them with neither haste nor pity. It brings the most absolute contempt of the individual to this execution. It acts like a blind instinct, irresistible and implacable. In a terribly concrete form it represents that brutal force that Schopenhauer described: 'The will to life separated from the intellect.'

"Despite all the optimistic utopias, every society is and will be exploitative, dominating, and tyrannical. It is so not by accident, but by essence."

This is even more the case because we feel the "general law of social preservation," admitted by almost all contemporary sociologists, weighing painfully upon our shoulders.

And if we add the "law of social conformity, which consists in every organized society demanding of its members a certain similarity of conduct, appearance, and even of opinions and ideas," and which "consequently brings with it a law of the elimination of individuals rebellious to this conformism," the conflict between the individual and society appears to us to its full extent.

A glance around us confirms in a striking fashion the conclusion that we arrived at theoretically.

What is more iniquitous in fact than the so-called social contract, in the name of which each is crushed by all? You will be a worker, you will be a soldier, you will be a prostitute, for social necessities demand this, and because a contract that no one will ever ask you to agree to forces you to be so. You will obey the law, you will be tradition's servant; you will live according to usage and custom. And yet tradition, law, and usage restrict you, hinder your development, make you suffer. Obey, bow, abdicate, otherwise your neighbors will condemn and pursue you.

Public opinion will deride you and will call for the worst punishments for your insolence; the law will attack you. Starved, defamed, cursed, dishonored you will be the rebel who they implacably strangle.

Such is the reality. “I” have neither fatherland, nor money nor property to defend. What difference do my interests make to society? It needs soldiers, and so it imposes on me the fatherland, the barracks, a uniform...

“I” am no longer the dupe of the outdated morality that rules the life of the crowd. I aspire to love freely...But the social body needs loves that are respectful of the law, and if I don’t marry before the mayor the law and opinion reserve their rigors for me.

I love work. But I want to freely carry it out. The wage system presents me with the alternative of being a slave, a thief, or of dying of hunger.

And we shouldn’t condemn one form of social organization – authoritarian capitalism – more than other. To be sure, it isn’t difficult to conceive of a society incomparably less bad, more logical, more intelligently organized. But aside from the fact that its more or less distant realization is an arguable hypothesis, we shouldn’t hide from ourselves that it will always present serious obstacles to the development of the individual.

The hypothesis of a collectivist tomorrow presages a ferocious struggle between the state and the few individualities desirous of preserving their autonomy. Even understood in the broadest sense – that of our anarcho-communist friends – a social grouping will inevitably tend to impose one ideological credo on its members. There will still be the struggle between the individual and society, but instead of disputing his liberty and his material life it will dispute his intellectual and moral independence. And nothing says that for the men of the future – if that future is ever realized – the course of that struggle will not be every bit as painful as the fight for bread, love, and fresh air is today!

In every social grouping the individualist will remain a rebel.

Just because we take note of the antagonism between the individual and society we shouldn't be thought to be unsociable. Yet on several occasions adversaries have sought to create that confusion.

Life in society has advantages that none among us would think of contesting. But as egoists, desirous of living in accordance with our ideas, we don't want to accept even the unavoidable inconveniences. This is one of the characteristic traits of an individualist: "He doesn't resign himself, even to what is fated."

If by a sociable individual we mean he who doesn't disturb his neighbor – or disturbs as little as possible, the individualist is the soul of sociability. Above all, this is the case through interest: to disturb more often than not opens one to being disturbed. He thus lets others live as they wish, as long as they grant him the same right. He doesn't ignore the advantages of "association freely consented to," a temporary association of good wills, with a practical goal in mind. But he doesn't want to be the dupe of the idol of Solidarity and allow himself to be absorbed by a coterie, a chapel, or a sect.

If he is strong – and we think that it is impossible to affirm yourself without being strong – he is even more sociable.

The strong are generous, being rich enough to be generous: the most energetic rebels, the most indomitable enemies of society have always been big-hearted.