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Factionalism & Individualism

Albert Meltzer

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1968

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This letter is part of the discussion following the 'Statement
by the Black Flag Group to the Liverpool Conference of the
Anarchist Federation of Britain, Sept., 1968'

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with the perennial discussion of the point “if anarchism means freedom why can’t I call myself an anarchist and oppose anarchism?” which is what some of it amounts to. (In a recent pamphlet, published “for the anarchist federation”, someone actually says he is and always has been in favour of government but does not consider this means he should not call himself an anarchist.)

A. Meltzer.

P.S. I do not suggest Neville supports all or any of the views expressed by the other Elitists. Neither do they! They have in common a desire to ‘shock’ and an ability to bore – even by debating society standards.

ions as – “I am an anarchist but I am opposed to negroes”; “The money system is anarchistic and guarantees freedom”; “Gold-water/Poujade etc are anarchistic”; “I need a government, as an anarchist, for the safeguarding of my freedom”; “anarchism means libertarian prison warders” etc. (I could put names in brackets but this seems to be regarded as unkind!)

One can answer such questions as normal Tory questions. To be expected to answer them as “expressions of a school of anarchism” is to place oneself in a ridiculous position. Take away your anarchistic audience, however, and what do these people try to out-outré each other with? Not the same conservatism – almost immediately one of them becomes “un ami de Bonnot” to shock his fellow-“individualists”.⁴

All this is what we have shaken ourselves away from. But now P. Neville has his new position as an “individualist”-elitist. He, however, is a child of the Peace Movement. Intellectually superior as he is, he must have his “conferances” and meet “informally” for democratic discussions. He wants it to be part and parcel of a “conference”-making machinery. Thus he introduces attacks on various people, strives to analyse attitudes while maintaining the platitudes of loftiness.

Debating Society

Well, let him do so. But is the anarchist movement a revolutionary organisation, or is it a debating society? If the latter, he has his place, though one feels the arguments are dishonest. But why does he object so strongly to there being TWO organisations – one a debating society, in which all points of view can go on talking until Doomsday, and the other striving to be a revolutionary organisation? Perhaps it will succeed, perhaps it won’t – but why must there be only the one to be burdened

⁴ Photo of the first meeting of “Les Amis de Jules Bonnot” is at www.sidparker.com

It is a pity Peter Neville descends to meaningless abuse (“is the AFB a twinkle in my eye” etc) which can only put people off the discussion. It IS confusing to “newcomers” and he adds to, and perhaps participates in, the confusion.

He regards it as perfectly proper that he, or others, should raise the factional banner of “Individualism” to distinguish themselves from others who are presumably faceless, mob anarchists. However, he pours out invective on anyone who wants to raise another factional banner, say “Revolutionary” – as if they were the only revolutionaries, forsooth! The “Black Flag” Group (formerly to the Liverpool Conference, calling themselves “Cuddonites” as a joke against the “Stirnerites”) “introduced factionalism” – but the “Minus One” Group merely asserted its individuality.¹ (Declension: “I assert individuality”; “You introduce factionalism”; “They are schismatics”). The manifesto of that Black Flag group was described by Donald Room (Conscious Egoist from way back) as “exceptional in its courtesy” – he suggested “Meliorist” instead of the suggested “Liberal” and “Revolutionary”; in the final draft, someone suggested “Revolutionary” and “Libertarian” it not being suggested that one was not the other, but solely to distinguish, just as “Individualist” does.

Individualism.

For despite Neville, ALL anarchists are individualists. The reason most anarchists who know the movement only since “Minus One” began reject the word “individualism” is because “Minus One” has made it a factional slogan. (This, despite Neville, is perfectly proper. There is no reason why it should not do so. Sid Parker has always behaved in the most hon-

¹ *Minus One* (“Individualist Anarchist Review”) see www.unionofegoists.com

ourable manner towards the movement – e.g. he would not attend meetings called to discuss action knowing he was in advance opposed to action; to the best of my knowledge he has never since forming “Minus One” called himself a member of the AFB because he is opposed to any such action as it might undertake).

Prior to 1940, most anarchists used the words individualism, communism, socialism, syndicalism as denoting phases of anarchism, or different aspects of anarchism, but not – in this country – did they denote factional trends. Most accepted the view – reiterated by Christie and myself in “Floodgates”² – that inasmuch as anarchism is one extreme of individualism at the other end of which is Capitalist Individualism, so it is also another extreme of socialism, at the other end of which is Marxist Communism. It is extreme individualism and extreme socialism.

After 1940, Eddie Shaw, of Glasgow, introduced into the AFB the idea of “Conscious Egoism” as working-class revolutionary syndicalism. He made a great impression in Glasgow (at one time the Glasgow AF commanded audiences of two or three thousand). What he was doing was, of course, rephrasing syndicalist clichés in terms of Stirner (unofficial strike committees are “unions of egoists” and so on). He had a striking command of working class oratory and his theories sounded new and original. He and Jimmy Raeside made a strong influence on the British anarchist movement. (Many of those calling themselves “individualists” in the 1960 census in *Freedom* meant just this).

Of those to be influenced in the English movement, I think one can fairly include Donald Rooum and Tony Gibson though both I think later parted company with his class struggle ideas. Both however, and others like them, believed in anarchism as

² *Floodgates of Anarchy* (Albert Meltzer and Stuart Christie) was published in February 1970.

revolutionary – Tony Gibson’s articles on the money system, prisons, intelligence &c. in “Freedom” are quite specifically revolutionary anarchist. Nobody thought of the conscious egoist then as in any way a faction. Only when Sid Parker began “Minus One” – with using the word “individualism” to denote what I suppose would be nearer the individualism of Armand in France or the American “Individualists” – Tucker etc. – was it thought of here as something apart and separate. But even then, this did not cause any confusion since Sid Parker always honourably made his position quite clear.

Confusion and “anti-individualism” really began when the Lamb & Flag meetings in London³ became well attended and provided a Sunday night entertainment. Along came a new bunch – who happened to take the name Individualist from Minus One but were in fact Elitists. They affected languid philosophical manners and wearily deplored action, the working class etc. They turned from that to sustained interruptions, and posed a problem: If anarchists believe in freedom, at what point do you stop people breaking up meetings with persistent interruptions? (added to the fact that if you throw someone out of licensed premises, or allow them to continue making a scene, the landlord will close you down for ‘disorderly conduct’).

“These are not Individualists,” protested Tony Gibson. “They are just ill-mannered cunts”. Nor had their “individualism” anything in common with what had hitherto been known as such. What were the questions that “could not be answered” – as P. Neville smugly asserts? They were all variations on one theme: the expression of normal Conservative clichés but stating that these were anarchistic. Anarchism is already as revolutionary as one can go without expressing it in action and they deplored action so they sought to be outré and shocking by such opin-

³ the disruption was discussed in *Freedom* 12/11/66, 19/11/66, 26/11/66