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Individualist Perspectives

Emile Armand

1957

The anarchist individualists do not present themselves as proletarians, absorbed only in the search for material amelioration, tied to a class determined to transform the world and to substitute a new society for the actual one. They place themselves in the present; they disdain to orient the coming generations towards a form of society allegedly destined to assure their happiness, for the simple reason that from the individualist point of view happiness is a conquest, an individuals internal realization.

Even if I believed in the efficacy of a universal social transformation, according to a well-defined system, without direction, sanction, or obligation, I do not see by what right I could persuade others that it is the best. For example, I want to live in a society from which the last vestige of authority has disappeared, but, to speak frankly, I am not certain that the “mass,” to call it what it is, is capable of dispensing with authority. I want to live in a society in which the members think by and for themselves, but the attraction which is exercised on the mass by publicity, the press, frivolous reading and by State-subsidized distractions is such that I ask myself whether men will ever be able to reflect and judge with an independent mind.

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I may be told in reply that the solution of the social question will transform every man into a sage. This is a gratuitous affirmation, the more so as there have been sages under all regimes. Since I do not know the social form which is most likely to create internal harmony and equilibrium in social unity, I refrain from theorizing.

When “voluntary association” is spoken of, voluntary adhesion to a plan, a project, a given action, this implies the possibility of refusing the association, adhesion or action. Let us imagine the planet submitted to a single social or economic life; how would I exist if this system did not please me? There remains to me only one expedient: to integrate or to perish. It is held that, “the social question” having been solved, there is no longer a place for non-conformism, recalcitrance, etc.... but it is precisely when a question has been resolved that it is important to pose new ones or to return to an old solution, if only to avoid stagnation.

If there is a “Freedom” standing over and above all individuals, it is surely nothing more than the expression of their thoughts, the manifestation and diffusion of their opinions. The existence of a social organization founded on a single ideological unity interdicts all exercise of freedom of speech and of ideologically contrary thought. How would I be able to oppose the dominant system, proposing another, supporting a return to an older system, if the means of making my view-point known or of publicizing my critiques were in the possession of the agents of the regime in power? This regime must either accept reproach when compared to other social solutions superior to its own, or, despite its termination in “ist,” it is no better than any other regime. Either it will admit opposition, secession, schism, fractionalism, competition, or nothing will distinguish it significantly from a dictatorship. This “ist” regime would undoubtedly claim that it has been invested with its power by the masses, that it does not exercise its power or control except by the delegation of assemblies or

congresses; but as long as it did not allow the intransigents and refractories to express the reasons for their attitude and for their corresponding behavior, it would be only a totalitarian system. The material benefits on which a dictatorship prides itself are of no importance. Regardless of whether there is scarcity or abundance, a dictatorship is always a dictatorship.

It is asked of me why I call my individualism “anarchist individualism”? Simply because the State concretizes the best organized form of resistance to individual affirmation. What is the State? An organism which bills itself as representative of the social body, to which power is allegedly delegated, this power expressing the will of an autocrat or of popular sovereignty. This power has no reason for existing other than the maintenance of the extant social structure. But individual aspirations are unable to come to term with the existence of the State, personification of Society, for, as Palante says: “All society is and will be exploitative, usurpacious, dominating, and tyrannical. This it is not by accident but by essence.” Yet the individualist would be neither exploited, usurped, dominated, tyrannized nor dispossessed of his sovereignty. On the other hand, Society is able to exercise its constraint on the individual only thanks to the support of the State, administrator and director of the affairs of Society. No matter which way he turns the individual encounters the State or its agents of execution, who do not care in the least whether the regulations which they enforce concur or not with the diversity of temperaments of the subjects upon whom they are administered. From their aspirations as from their demands, the individualists of our school have eliminated the State. That is why they call themselves “anarchists.”

But we deceive ourselves if we imagine that the individualists of our school are anarchists (AN-ARCHY, etymologically, man's only negation of the state, and does not pertain to other matters) only in relation to the State – such as the western democracies or the totalitarian systems. This point cannot be overemphasized. Against all that which is power, that is, eco-

conomic as well as political domination, esthetic as well as intellectual, scientific as well as ethical, the individualists rebel and form such fronts as they are able, alone or in voluntary association. In effect, a group or federation can exercise power as absolute as any State if it accepts in a given field all the possibilities of activity and realization.

The only social body in which it is possible for an individualist to evolve and develop is that which admits a concurrent plurality of experiences and realizations, to which is opposed all groupings founded on an ideological exclusiveness, which, well-meant though they may be, threaten the integrity of the individual from the moment that this exclusiveness aims to extend itself to the non-adherents of the grouping. To call this anti-statist would be doing no more than provoking a mask for an appetite for driving a herd of human sheep.

I have said above that it is necessary to insist on this point. For example, anarchist communism denies, rejects and expels the State from its ideology; but it resuscitates it the moment that it substitutes social organization for personal judgment. If anarchist individualism thus has in common with anarchist communism the political negation of the State, of the "Arche," it only marks a point of divergence. Anarchist communism places itself on the economic plane, on the terrain of the class struggle, united with syndicalism, etc. (this is its right), but anarchist individualism situates itself on the psychological plane, and on that of resistance to social totalitarianism, which is something entirely different. (Naturally, anarchist individualism follows the many paths of activity and education: philosophy, literature, ethics, etc., but I have wanted to make precise here only some points of our attitude to the social environment.)

I do not deny that this is not very new, but it is taking a position to which it is good to return from time to time.