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The Relationship Between Pessimism and Individualism

Georges Palante

1914

The century that just passed is without a doubt that in which pessimism found its most numerous, its most varied, its most vigorous and its most systematic interpreters. In addition, individualism was expressed in that century with exceptional intensity by representatives of high quality.

It could be interesting to bring together these two forms of thought, dominant in our era; to ask what is the logical or sentimental connection that exists between them, and to what degree pessimism engenders individualism and individualism engenders pessimism.

But the question thus posed is too general. There are many kinds of pessimism and many kinds of individualism. Among the latter there is one that in no way implies pessimism, and that is the doctrinaire individualism that issues from the French Revolution and to which so many moralists, jurists, and politicians of our century are attached. This individualism could take as its motto the phrase of Wilhelm von Humboldt that Stuart Mill chose as the epigraph of his "Essay on Liberty": "The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in

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these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity." Individualists of this kind believe that all human individuals can harmonically develop in society, that their very diversity is a guarantee of the richness and beauty of human civilization.

These individualists are rationalists. They have faith in reason, the principle of order, of unity, and of harmony. They are idealists: they have faith in an ideal of social justice. unitarian and egalitarian, they believe, despite individual differences and inequalities, in the profound and real unity of human kind. These individualists are "humanists" in the sense that Stirner gives to this word: solidarists, socialists, if we take this latter term in its largest sense. Their individualism is turned outwards, towards society. It's a social individualism, in the sense that it doesn't separate the individual from society, which they don't place in opposition to each other. On the contrary, they always consider the individual as a social element that harmonizes with the all and that only exists in function of the all. We will not insist upon this individualism, which obviously implies a more or less firm social optimism.

The individualism we have in mind here is completely different. This individualism is not a political, juridical and moral doctrine, but a psychological and moral attitude, a form of sensibility, a personal sensation of life and a personal will to life.

It is impossible to fix in a definition all the traits, all the degrees, all the nuances of this psychological disposition. It affects a special tone in every soul in which it makes itself known.

We can say that as a personal sensation of life, individualism is the sentiment of uniqueness, of individuality in what it has of the differential, the private, and the un-revealable. Individualism is an appeal to the interiority of sentiment, to individual inspiration in the face of social conventions and ready-made ideas. Individualism implies a sentiment of personal infallibility, an idea of intellectual and sentimental superiority, of inner

and clarity as the human will to life intensifies, diversifies and becomes refined in individual consciousness. It is thus that is affirmed the dual consistency of pessimism and individualism, indissolubly united and interconnected.

Nevertheless, it is possible that this psychological tie that we believe we have discovered between pessimism and individualism is nothing but an *a priori* view. If instead of reasoning about psychological likelihoods we consult the history of ideas of the 19th century we will perhaps see that the relationship of ideas that we have just indicated is neither as simple nor as consistent as at first appears. We must penetrate in detail the different forms of pessimism and individualism and more closely analyze their relationship if we want to arrive at precise ideas.

artistocratism. Of irreducible difference between an *ego* and an other, the idea of uniqueness. Individualism is a return to the self and a gravitation to the self.

As personal will to life individualism is a desire to “be one-self,” according to the wish of a character from Ibsen (Peer Gynt), a desire for independence and originality. The individualist wants to be his own maker, his own furnisher of truth and illusion; his own builder of truth and illusion; his own builder of dreams; his own builder and demolisher of ideals. This wish for originality can, incidentally, be more or less energetic, more or less demanding, more or less ambitious. More or less happy, too, according to the quality and the value of the individuality in cause, according to the amplitude of the thought and according to the intensity of, the will to, individual might.

Be it as personal sensation of life or as personal will to life, individualism is or tends to be anti-social: if it is not so from the start, it later and inevitably becomes so. Sentiment of the profound uniqueness of the *ego*, desire for originality and independence, individualism cannot help but provoke the sentiment of a silent struggle between the individual self and society. In fact, the tendency of every society is to reduce the sentiment of individuality as much as possible: to reduce uniqueness through conformism, spontaneity through discipline, instantaneousness of the self through caution, sincerity of sentiment through the lack of sincerity inherent in any socially defined function, confidence and pride in the self through the humiliation inseparable from any kind of social training. This is why individualism necessarily has the sentiment of a conflict between its *ego* and the general *ego*. Individualism becomes here a principle of passive or active inner resistance, of silent or declared opposition to society, a refusal to submit oneself to it; a distrust of it. In its essence, individualism holds in contempt and negates the social bond. We can define it as a will to isolation, a sentimental and intellectual, theoretical and practical commitment to withdraw from society, if not in fact — following the

examples of the solitaries of the Thebeiad and the more modern one of Thoreau — at least in spirit and intention, by a kind of interior and voluntary retreat. This distancing from society, this voluntary moral isolation that we can practice in the very heart of society can take on the form of indifference and resignation as well as that of revolt. It can also assume the attitude of the spectator, the contemplative attitude of the thinker in an Ivory Tower. But there is always in this acquired indifference, in this resignation or this spectatorial isolation, a remnant of interior revolt.

Sentiment of uniqueness and more or less energetic expression of the will to personal power; will to originality, will to independence, will to insubordination and revolt, will to isolation and to withdrawal into the self. Sometimes also will to supremacy, to the deployment of force on and against others, but always with a return to the self, with a sentiment of personal infallibility, with an indestructible confidence in oneself, even in defeat, even in the failure of hopes and ideals. Intransigence, inaccessibility of internal conviction, fidelity to oneself up to the bitter end. Fidelity to one's misunderstood ideas, to one's impregnable and unassailable will: individualism is all this, either globally or in detail, this element or that, this nuance or that predominating according to the circumstances and the case.

Individualism, understood as we just expressed it, that is, as an internal disposition of the soul, individualism as sensation and will is no longer, like the individualism of which we spoke above, like political and juridical individualism, turned outwards and subordinated to social life, to its constraints, its demands and obligations. It is turned inwards. It places itself at the beginning or seeks refuge in the end in the unbreakable and intangible interior being.

To say that there is a close psychological relationship between the individualist and pessimist sensibilities means almost stating the obvious. Pessimism supposes a basic individ-

ualism. It supposes that interiority of sentiment, that return to the self (almost always painful) that is the essence of individualism. While optimism is nothing but an abstract metaphysical thesis, the echo of doctrinal hearsay, pessimism is a sensation of lived life; it comes from the inner, from an individual psychology. It proceeds from what is most intimate in us: the ability to suffer. It predominates among those of a solitary nature who live withdrawn into themselves and see social life as pain. Thoroughbred pessimists, the great artists and theoreticians of suffering, lived solitary and as strangers in the midst of men, retrenched in their *ego* as if in a fortress from which they let fall an ironic and haughty gaze on the society of their kind. And so it is not by accident, but by virtue of an intimate psychological correlation that pessimism is accompanied by a tendency towards egotistic isolation.

Inversely, the individualist spirit is almost fatedly accompanied by pessimism. Does not experience as old as the world teach us that in nature the individual is sacrificed to the species? That in society it is sacrificed to the group? Individualism arrives at a resigned or hopeless noting of the antinomies that arise between the individual and the species on one hand, and between the individual and society on the other.

Life doubtless perpetually triumphs over this antinomy, and the fact that despite it all humanity continues to live can appear to be an unarguable reply that refutes both pessimism and individualism. But this is not certain. For if humanity as a species and as a society pursues its destiny without worrying about individuals' complaints or revolts, individualism does not die for all that. Always defeated, never tamed, it is incarnated in souls of a special caliber, imbued with the sentiment of their uniqueness and strong in their will to independence. Individualism suffers a defeat in every individual who dies after having served ends and surrendered to forces that are beyond him. But he survives himself through the generations, gaining in force