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Jean Grave
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1903

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Individualism And Solidarity

Jean Grave

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Years ago, some litterateurs realized that they had discovered Nietzsche, Stirner and even Schopenhauer. Once they followed their trail, behold, they learned that there was an individual in the world – the Individual! – that this individual took precedence over everything, that he had the right to live, to enjoy, to develop in his entirety, according to his faculties and aptitudes, without having to take into account any hindrance, any obstacle, except to break them if they get in the way, or subdue them if they could be of use.

And so a little anarchy was fabricated that tended to nothing less than to elevate a new aristocracy: the intellectual aristocracy, who, like the others, deeply despised the rest of the mass, seeing in it nothing but a herd of slaves, good to produce and toil for the "intellectual", who could thus develop and grow in strength, intelligence and beauty!

This conception of the individual, of the intellectual, flattered too much the vanity of some losers, so that they had to become their resolute champions. It is a theory too comfortable to justify the most contradictory acts, so that we had to be given this new school.

The most complete freedom for the individual, his right to full satisfaction of all his needs, are absolutely legitimate claims, and there was no need to go out to dig up Nietzsche and Stirner to give them some consecration. That's what man has been seeking since he was in the world, it is this primordial instinct that made him try the different revolutions, even the most political ones, that he carried out along the way. And that's what communist anarchists never ceased to claim.

Only, there you have it, communist anarchists, who are not satisfied with words and abstractions, partisans of the scientific method that requires us to rely on facts, were not content with doing metaphysics. They studied the conditions of existence of the individual, and without bragging about having made an astonishing discovery — because it is so obvious — they saw that the individual was not a single entity, living in the clouds of dialectics, but a being of flesh and blood, with a circulation of about two billion copies, and that what was true for one, was equally true for each of those two billion.

Moreover, the need to live in society is not to be discussed. It was because he grouped together with his fellows that man acquired the faculty of language, and that of expressing his ideas; it was in the exchange of ideas with his companions that he managed to modify and broaden his first impressions, making them traditions that the generations passed on, discussing them after having blindly followed them, and of which, from progress to progress, he constituted today's scientific, artistic and literary background. The man who would completely isolate himself from his fellow men, would return to the state of a brute animal, if the better armed species had not killed him before.

So, here the problem gets complicated. Due to the needs of their bodies, and due to the limited space in which they are enclosed, which necessarily limits their field of evolution, it is no longer enough for individuals to assert their rights; above all, they need to look for the conditions in which they will be

able to exercise them, without harm to themselves and without harm to others, which could bring in reprisals and limit the rights that are too brutally asserted.

And from the moment when the individual cannot live and develop except in society, he has only two ways to assert his freedom: — acting at the mercy of his will, if he is strong enough to impose himself on others, without worrying about their complaints when he harms them, or making them believe, by trickery, that he acts in their interest... and then there is no need to claim for a social transformation, because we have the bourgeois society that provides us with a wide range of such methods and their different combinations; — or else individuals will get along to find a social organization that, while bringing them maximum welfare in exchange for minimum efforts, allows them to evolve without getting in the way of each other, preserving, through reciprocal concessions or a perfect adaptation and combination of aptitudes, the greatest amount of freedom possible... that is to say, by an intelligent practice of solidarity.

J. GRAVE