

A Brief Introduction: Individualist-Anarchism

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Private Property has crushed true individualism, and set up an individualism that is false, it has debarred one part of the community from being individual by starving them. It has debarred the other part of the community by putting them on the wrong road and encumbering them.

- Oscar Wilde

The first time I came across the term "individualism" in a positive light was by reading the little-known text, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' by Oscar Wilde. I've thought about how best to summarise anarchist-individualism long and hard. It's quite the task, given the variety of offshoots and their seeming contradictions. I chose Oscar Wilde's text because it was my 'off-ramp' from traditional forms of socialism or collectivism. Before reading it, my life was order, discipline and dedication to a Cause whose own dedication was to itself, despite lofty claims. The Cause will suck you dry and leave you disillusioned and confused. It is riddled with the authoritarian logic of the state and industriousness, moralism, hierarchy and repression. These are all synonyms of the Good Cause. In a bourgeois world, 'good' is death, exploitation and the continued destruction of Mother Earth. The party, the union, and myriad political bodies deal in the same snake-oil and disciplinarian modes... these nascent state forms. What a *vile* spectacle to behold, **how hard it is to hold onto oneself**.

Wilde repeatedly refers to individualistic socialism as opposed to a 'Barrack Socialism' and repressive socialism – where the needs of people are met, and development as individuals is encouraged in every avenue, science, philosophy and the arts of their choosing. His socialism is not built on a grand design, using the logic of state, duty and so forth to compel one's activities. It holds none of the flattery afforded to a state of living in poverty, which many socialists dabble in, romanticising desperation. It is decidedly focused on the development of individual liberty and freedom. Wilde eulogises the thief, claiming it is a person of greater character who steals rather than receives charity. He also lambasts the charity givers for prolonging the suffering of the poor. Like Wilde, many early individualists were socialists (of a type) and believed that the total value of a worker's labour should be theirs alone.

To be clear, I am not referring to 'Individualism' in a way understood within the popular lexicon. I am referring to anarchist-individualism, which recognises not just the collective will (the will of its leaders and pastors) but capitalism and the state as enemies of its own will – and those desires are as unique and numerous as the proponents of individualism. As such, individualists have been involved in various activities over the centuries: pacifist organising, building educational facilities based on libertarian pedagogy, utopian colonies (popularised in South America), keeping to themselves, stargazing and conspiring against the enemies of their desires.

There are examples of individualist-anarchists who have resorted to violent acts against the state and capital – the Bonnot Gang, Conspiracy Cells of Fire and the Informal Anarchist Federation, to name a few. It is important to remember that these groups do not define the tendency and are often used to scapegoat individualists and anarchists (whether the reader feels this is fair). It was, in fact, Luigi Galleani, an insurrectionist and anarchist communist, who popularised violent reprisals against the state and capital through Propaganda of the Deed. However, many would describe his anti-organisationalism as a form of individualism.

Given the multifaceted tapestry of will, myriad interests, and personal desires of its proponents, it is hard to pin down 'anarchist-individualism'. The voluntary nature of anarchist organisational models (frequently spoken of by Emma Goldman) suggests that even within those focussed on the Cause of socialism, the individual remains an essential feature within decision-making. Individualism can also be gleaned in what Bookchin calls (derisively) 'lifestyle anarchism' – counter-cultural movements and other alternative lifestyles. His latent Stalinism shines through his discarding of fundamental anarchist ethos. If he had done his research, he would find that anarchists have always tied their politics of liberation to the present and, as such, pioneered many new modes of living – experiments in homesteading, female reproductive rights and sexual liberty (but to name a few). The tie between means and ends within anarchism does not end on the political or organisational plane. 'Liberation' is not some pie in the sky to be deferred beyond death. If liberation means anything, it means something in the here and now.

Many detractors of anarchism have leveraged the term Individualist or lifestylist against anarchists as an insult or to discredit ideas of anarchism throughout history. Some of us are comfortable, happy even, with the word levelled at us. In my mind, individualism is the purest (for lack of a better term) of anarchist thought. It rests on axioms that are the fundamental bases of all anarchist tendencies: that a person is theirs and that state and disciplinary methods are to be rejected alongside all external authorities. That is not to reject cooperation; how else would early individualists have organised communities throughout South America or colonies all over the globe to live off the fruits of their labour? Instead, individualists tend to organise based on self-interest, mutual agreement, and gain.

It is paramount to remember that individualism cannot be reduced to any tendency within it. I've neglected to mention several influential writers, such as Novatore, Martucci, and a variety of other critical anarchist writers (prior contributors to Free Spirit have touched on these persons). This short introduction will soon accompany a broader exploration of individualist-anarchism and the tension, differences and divergences within the tendency.

If I had to summarise in one sentence, anarchist-individualism is this: there is no greater authority than "I".

I recommend writers like Dora Marsden, Sidney Parker, Emile Armand, Henry Thoreau, the early Victor Serge, and Voltairine De Cleyre to learn more about the topic. Many of their texts are in the Anarchist Library.

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