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Dangerous Fallacies

Saverio Merlino

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Anarchists, whether individualistic or communistic, and even some Social Democrats, are fond of speaking of the "absolute sovereignty of the individual," and they claim for each individual "free access to the means of production." "Let everybody do whatever he likes," they say, and the implication is that society will then be organized to perfection, or rather that it will do without organization, individuals will agree or disagree, groups will cooperate spontaneously, without any coercive power, without any settled plan, and without any permanent individual initiative. Every man will go to his work, will choose his own accord or be allowed the occupation most congenial to his own aptitudes, and yet that will happen to be the very sort of work society at that moment is peculiarly in need of. Each individual will likewise consume what he may take a fancy to, consulting but his own pleasure, and yet he will not waste the resources of society—he will not destroy the means for further production, nor appropriate to his secondary needs that which is essential to the subsistence of his fellow men. And it is also said, that in spite of the complications of social relations—of individual interests, in spite of the variety of needs, capabilities, climates, customs, civilizations, etc., no man

would try and get the best of his neighbor, each would act in a true spirit of solidarity, and no conflict of any kind would arise, but perfect order and harmony would prevail. And it is sometimes assumed that science would suggest to each individual the right function to perform in society, would prescribe his food, measure his volume of air, light, etc., and would indicate the best purpose to which might be turned each parcel of the soil and each stock of commodities. Indeed, each individual would carry in his head the whole plan of social economy, and, wonderful enough, the plan of each would exactly coincide with those of the hundreds of millions of his fellow men. And ultimately there would be such an abundance of all the good things of this world—each region, perhaps each group if not each individual, would supply all necessary requirements, that even exchanges would not be any longer requisite.

Such things have been said and repeated with an insistence and a good faith worthy of a better cause. No doubt many a great truth underlies such paradoxes—truths which it is all-important to bring home to the people. For instance, it should be known that human society is not even now altogether led by the weak threads called laws, rules, and punishments, handed down by cunning and rapacious men to suit their own interests. There are other forces at play besides police and tribunals—besides rent, profit, and interest. There are ignored or suppressed energies in the masses of the people, the powerful spring of common interests, the manifest advantages of cooperation, and lastly, but not least, the sentiment of solidarity; and these may grow by education and constant practice to become part and parcel of human nature.

But, this admission having been made, we must look the practical difficulties of a social re-organization square in the face, and admit that society is much more complicated than it appears to some people to be. We have to discard the notion of the “perfect individual,” which is at the bottom of many of the views just referred to.

We must also, however unwillingly, refuse to believe that science can provide us with an incontrovertible ready-made solution of the problem of the organization of labor and distribution of the produce. Science may perhaps one day give us the data for such a solution, or rather for a variety of solutions, the number of possible combinations being infinite, but the practical solution must be found out by man in each particular case.

We must also dismiss the supposition of such an abundant supply of the various commodities being at once obtained that men shall have more than they require for the actual satisfaction of their needs. Of course if such an abundant supply of commodities were the immediate result of new social surroundings things might proceed smoothly enough under almost any system. Men's needs, however, are not a fixed quantity—they admit of indefinite expansion. The production of superfluous commodities is not likely to occur, but as soon as there be enough of a certain commodity other commodities will be produced and the standard of life will be raised.

There is but one argument left in favor of the views which I am criticizing—that the individual will exercise discretion in his choice of labor, and in his choice of consumption—that he will not shirk work, nor take more than his legitimate share of the common stock—that labor will be a pleasure and consumption will be a matter of indifference to him.

Speaking however of the immediate future we must expect there will still be people who, by education, tradition, and instinct, will be willing to live at other people's expense. It will suffice that a few such people set an example: many more will follow.

But let us waive this objection, and suppose a society composed of the very best men. How could the individual know what particular labor his fellow-men expect of him at any time? How could he know what commodities he might consume without injury to them? How could each group know what raw materials it might receive of other groups? How could it be prevented that one or many

groups, severally or jointly, took advantage either of the more favorable situation of their land, factory, mine, or railway, of a new invention, the opening of a road, or even of their own greater industry, skill, or thrift, in order to dictate harsh terms to other groups or individuals, accumulate wealth, and ultimately become a menace to the liberty and well being of the people?

These problems admit of no solution so long as we take our stand on the principle of liberty or the will or the needs of the individual, and leave social interests—(by which I mean the permanent interest of a community, in the continuity of its existence over and above the monetary or apparent interests of the individual)—to chance arrangements of individuals.

What the real Anarchist-Socialist solution of these problems might be I will try to explain in another article.