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Anarchism versus Socialism

Sidney E. Parker

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The trouble with discussing socialism is that the word is such a vague one. Anarchism, in comparison, is clear and precise. An anarchist is someone who is without belief in authority—an individual who wants to live his life without having to submit to a will external to him. Anarchism is therefore the philosophy of living without authority, as its etymology suggests.

But what is socialism?

The Little Oxford Dictionary is blunt: “Socialism: the principle that individual liberty should be completely subordinated to the community.” Professed socialists themselves, however, have eschewed such bluntness and the most contradictory doctrines have been labeled “socialist”. There have been and are, national socialists, Christian socialists, libertarian socialists, state socialists, Marxist socialists, spiritual socialists, idealist socialists and so forth and so on. The only way one can get any sense out of the bewildering confusion of “true interpretations” is to find some belief or principle common to all socialists which distinguishes them from other people.

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Since, for socialists in general, the economic question is paramount—every problem tending to be reduced to the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of socialism—there is one belief which all socialists, from Statists to libertarian communists, share, and that is the belief in the need to put the ownership or control of the means of production into the hands of some collective body, be it the government or “society”. Socialism above all is, as Auguste Hamon has said, a “social system in which — a social doctrine *by which* — the means of production are socialized”. It is my argument that this wish to make society the owner and provider of the means of life is to put new authority over the individual in place of the old and is therefore not anarchism. Anarchism stands for leaving each individual free to provide for himself what he needs and is therefore not a complement of socialism but its opposite. It follows that those anarchists who think that anarchism is a form of socialism are deluding themselves and sooner or later will have to choose between them, for they cannot logically be both.

Undoubtedly there are some socialists who are genuinely concerned for the freedom of the individual and believe that by taking the means of production away from the capitalists and giving them to society, or the State as representative of society, they will abolish the subjection of the many to the privileged few and so secure the liberty of each individual. But how would this alter the position of the individual producer? Under capitalism he has to submit to the will of a handful of monopolists. Under socialism he would have to submit to the will of the collective. He would have no freedom to produce and exchange as he wishes and without this his individual freedom cannot exist.

The socialist might reply that when the means of production belong to all then everyone will be an owner. But of what use is it to me to be an owner of something in common with, say, 1,000,000 people? To own one millionth of something is in effect to own nothing. Under socialism, therefore, the individual would

be a proletarian—that is, a property-less person—and control of the means of production would be in the hands of an abstraction called “society”, and the interests of this abstraction would be superior to the interests of the individual. Everything would be for the “common good”.

It is not enough to say that the individual would still own his clothing or his toothbrush, and that only the means of producing these things would be owned in common. As Benjamin Tucker pointed out this means “the liberty to eat, but not to cook; to drink, but not to brew; to wear, but not to spin; to dwell, but not to build; to give, but not to sell or buy; to think, but not to print; to speak, but not to hire a hall; to dance, but not to pay the fiddler.”

Socialism, being a species of humanism, is a doctrine of *indiscriminate* solidarity. It suppresses direct exchange between the producer and the consumer and has for its ethic the obligation of each to work for the benefit of all. It assumes that since each individual will have the right to a *guaranteed living*, he must all have the duty to put *all he produces* at the disposal of the collectivity. The producer cannot choose who will benefit from this production; the consumer cannot choose who will be his producer. Socialism is thus a herd-philosophy, the practice of the bee-hive. Its consistent application would deny all freedom of choice and it is therefore a totalitarian system. Even if in theory there would be no laws in a socialist society to enforce the subordination of the individual to the mass, there would be a socially sanctioned system of moral coercion to achieve the same end.

Economic freedom — any kind of freedom — for the individual can only exist where there is a choice of alternatives. Anarchism can only be pluralist, allowing any kind of economic relationship that will satisfy the individuals involved. To tie the individual to collective ownership is not anarchism, for anarchism can only exist where there is the possibility for infinite change and variety.

The fundamental issue between anarchism and socialism was well put some time ago by Francis Ellingham when writing of the

difference between individualist anarchism and libertarian communism. He wrote that this difference concerned:

... who is to be the subject of the process of production, consumption and accumulation?

Is it to be the individual, working as an independent economic unit—either alone or, if he chooses, in association with other individuals? Or is it to be the community as a whole, working as a sort of super-family, and necessarily incorporating the individual, who thus becomes a cell in a larger economic organism?

Either the economy could be of such a nature that it *necessitated* association (and let us never forget that economic necessity can be at least as tyrannical as any government), or it could be based on the individual unit, leaving each individual free to associate, but never submerging him in any group from which he could not withdraw without economic ruin.

The libertarian communist ideal is, he continues,

... only a variation on the Marxist ideal that the State will 'wither away'. there are no rulers in the Marxist paradise, which, in that sense, is an anarchist world. But the supposedly 'free' individual is merely a cog in a gigantic social machine, held together by sheer force of economic necessity.

Where socialists go wrong in this matter is in their assumption that the individual can only be free—i.e. self-governing, self-owning—when his interests are combined with those of all other individuals. They believe in the collectivization of interests. But I am not free if my interests are inseparable from yours. My freedom lies in my opportunity to differ, in *dis*-unity, *dis*-connection,

dis-sent. I am freest when interests are *individualized*, when I can be sole sovereign over my person and can dispose of the things I produce, or the services I can offer, as I see fit.

Anarchism lies in the direction of the individualization of interests, economic or any other, not their socialization.

Socialism is a religion of Society—it is the sacrifice of the individual to the Collective.

Anarchism is the philosophy of the individual—it is the affirmation of individuality, the proud denial of legitimacy to any institution, group or idea that claims authority over the ego.