

In Defence of Individualism

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AMONGST the ways of dealing with individualist anarchism adopted by non-individualists are: (1) To deny that individualists can be anarchists by suggesting that individualism is synonymous with capitalism. (2) To denounce individualists as *agents provocateurs* (*pace* Jean Grave, the pope of anarchist communism in France). (3) To profess a tolerance for individualists as eccentrics, a few of whom “it is nice to have around”. Each of these ways boils down to a refusal to face individualist arguments and are based on the assumption that anarchism must be collectivist. Individualists, therefore, are either heretics who should be excommunicated or erring brothers who should be patronised. In “The Anarchist Communist Approach” P.H. avoids the ignorance of (1) and the vilification of (2), but clearly believes in (3). In spite of this, I will try to pick out some of his more specific statements for reply.

“... communists notice that freedom involves freedom to eat, have a home, freedom from being exploited at work and bombed and shot in war, as well as freedom to behave in an eccentric manner in an affluent democracy...”

Does P.H. know of any individualist anarchist who does *not* believe that freedom involves “freedom to eat, have a home, etc.”? I do not, and cannot see why he makes such a statement, since I would have thought that these things were “taken for granted” by every anarchist of whatever tendency. His insinuation that individualism is merely eccentric behaviour in an affluent democracy is baseless. Individualists have existed in every kind of society, whether impoverished or “affluent”.

“... most people in the world are denied these freedoms not because they are lacking in psychological will power or desire for sovereignty, but because power over their affairs is held by an exploiting ruling class.”

If most people in the world are not “lacking in psychological will power and desire for sovereignty” how is it that they let an “exploiting ruling class” deny them “these freedoms”? It seems to me that it is precisely *because* they lack these characteristics that authoritarianism exists. How else can one explain its origin and continued existence other than by “most people” wanting it? If they did not, anarchists would not be the tiny minority they are, nor would the ruling class, even if it were still in being, be able to get away with the gross milking of the masses that has gone on through the ages.

“Individualists make a song and dance about what everyone else takes for granted.”

I would love to know who these “everyone else” are. The Christians who believe the individual exists to serve God? The Marxist Communists who believe the individual exists to serve the Party or the “historical process”? Those anarchist communists who have preached self-sacrifice for the Cause, or, like Gaston Leval, have advocated the subordination of “the individual to the social factor”? It is because individualists put the individual above and before ideologies and institutions—even anarchist ones—that they differ from “everyone else”.

” ... although the phrase ‘common ownership of the means of production’ is harmless enough, it would be more accurate to say that in an anarchist society the concept of ownership would become redundant. The fear of individualist anarchists that the communist conception of society would lead to a new form of oppressing the individual is thus seen to be baseless. In general the anarchist emphasis is on the control of production, rather than ... on the ownership of production and the precise division of profits ...
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This is no answer at all to the individualist case against communism, and to substitute the word “control” for “ownership” is, in this context, a quibble. Effective ownership means control—I can hardly be said to own a coat if anyone can wear it without my being able to exercise any control over its use. If, in an anarchist society, “the concept of ownership will become redundant” then anyone wanting to enter into an economic relationship on the basis of individual ownership of the means of production would be denied this freedom. How does this square with “the uniqueness of the individual and his right to enjoy his personal life without intrusion or interference”? Will P.H. accept the proposition that in an anarchist *milieu* he individual will have the right to freely make any economic arrangements that suit him best, it being understood that he has no right to impose these arrangements on anyone who does not want them? If he does, will he then also accept the right of the individual to ownership of the instruments of production, it being understood that such ownership is the result of personal labour, or of a gift, not of exploitation? And also the right of the individual to freely dispose of his products by means of a medium of exchange?

One of the reasons that individualists are not communists, is that they are pluralists, who believe that the co-existence of different ways of going on—in economics as in other fields—is a guarantee of vitality and a defence against stagnancy and uniformity. Those anarchists who agree that only a communist economy is compatible with anarchism are demanding submission to one pattern of behaviour and denying a free choice of alternative patterns. This is not anarchism, but archism. For the individualist it makes little difference whether the means of production are in the control of a handful of private monopolists, a State corporation, a federation of syndicates, or a Commune. In each case he will be at the mercy of the good will of others. He will be forced to conform or starve. Independence is equally dear to him economically as it is in other things and this independence can only be real when he has free access to raw materials, personal ownership of his instruments of production and the right to free exchange of his products for those of others. This does not exclude the possibility for the individual to pool his resources with others in voluntary group communism, or any other collectivist arrangement, but it does exclude the possibility of an exclusive, or single economy by allowing the individual to live and produce apart from his fellows if he so wishes.

“It would be provocative to suggest that individualist anarchists need a communist movement to provide audiences and periodicals in which they can express their views.”

No, not provocative—just foolish. People like Josiah Warren and Benjamin Tucker were propagating individualism in the U.S.A. before any anarchist communist movement existed there, as did A. C. Cuddon in this country; Stirner and Proudhon wrote their pioneering works before anarchist communism had been heard of; during its heyday in, France, E. Armand’s individualist journal *l’Endehors* had a circulation of 6,000 and was published independently of the “communist movement”; and if P.H. will take the trouble to look round Freedom Bookshop he will find copies of *Minus One*, an individualist anarchist review, published with the support of individualists and sympathisers. Certainly, individualists will use any outlet they can to put forward their ideas, just as will P.H. and his comrades. As long as anarchist communist journals will publish me I will write for them, and their supporters are welcome to contribute to any individualist publication with which I am connected. I presume we can both agree that meetings and periodicals would be very dull if only one viewpoint could be expressed in them.

“Stirnerism takes one to the point where anarchism starts ... ”

How odd, then, that such prominent “Stirnerites” as Tucker, Armand and John Henry Mackay, considered themselves anarchists before they took up egoism. To me, “The Ego and His Own”—which I wish some of its critics would read one day—represents an advance on the utopian revolutionism of Bakunin and Kropotkin. Stirner’s conception of the “unique”, or self-owning individual, opens up a development of anarchism far more fruitful and profound than waiting for some revolutionary proletarian Godot. If a person has no ability to “realise his interests’ and ‘individuality” in spite of an authoritarian environment, I cannot see how he is going to be able to live in any kind of free way of life. I accept the view of the Sydney Libertarians that anarchism is only one among a multitude of competing human interests and that there is no reason to suppose that by some miracle it will vanquish all others. This makes individual, egoistic anarchism far more relevant than any variety based upon the expectation of a collectivist heaven on earth.

“ ... and it would be just as logical to suggest that the man who sang “The working class can kiss my arse, I’ve got the foreman’s job at last,” was a true Stirnerite, although none of the anarchist Stirnerites would dream of taking the foreman’s job, but devise laborious arguments to prove it was not really in their interests.”

My own argument against taking a position of authority is simple. Authority is a relationship between governor and governed which binds both and destroys the independence of each. As Stirner put it: “He who, to hold his! own, must count on the absence of will in others is a thing made by these others, as the master is a thing made by the servant. If submissiveness ceased, it would be all over with lordship.” A conscious egoist might misjudge his interests in this matter and in an effort to free himself from one set of chains land up in another. But since he is known to be acting in what he thinks is his own interest, it is easier for people to know, where they stand with him and to bring their own egoism into play if he tries to dominate them. Authority, as I have suggested, is a reciprocal relationship and the sucker has only himself to blame if he lets himself be taken in.

Of course, this song an dance may well be about things taken for granted by “everyone else”. It would be nice to think so. But I doubt it.

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