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The Morality of Cooperation

Sidney E. Parker

1966

In the London Anarchist Group pamphlet *Anarchism*, Jack Stevenson states:

Anarchists want a society based upon cooperation, not competition...we want to see everyone cooperating for the common good, not just a few capitalists for the common ill...Cooperation equals friendship and peace while competition equals war.

Here we have the old socialist panacea “cooperation” disguised as anarchism. It is one of the sacred cows of all collectivist thinking that competition is a terrible evil and is only believed in by wicked people like the “capitalists”. One could point out that even during the heyday of nineteenth century capitalism there never was any free competition in the proper sense of the term. Workers had to compete among themselves in order to sell their labor to employers, but the power of the capitalists depended heavily upon economic monopolies backed by the legal power of the State. Apart from this, however, a totalitarian state can be described, theoretically at least, as a fully cooperative social system since nobody is allowed

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to offer any alternative way of going on. The army is a cooperative institution, and so is a prison. "Cooperation" can very easily equate servility and conformity.

On the other hand, Jack Stevenson and his comrades no doubt claim to be firm believers in freedom of speech. But what is freedom of speech? It is a situation in which different opinions can compete with one another! In fact all freedom of speech, publication and association is competition-the presentation of varied, and often contradictory, ways of going on. Jack Stevenson will retort that he doesn't believe in the enforced cooperation of the army or prison, but in free, voluntary cooperation. This, however, is rather different from his blunt assertion that cooperation is good in itself and competition evil in itself. If I am free to cooperate, then I must also be free not to cooperate. In other words, I can compete or cooperate as it suits my purpose, and anarchism is neither for one or the other per se but for freedom to do both. Jack Stevenson's statement, however, involves more than a careless use of the terms "cooperation" and "competition". He wants people to cooperate for the "common good". In place of the cooperation enforced by overt authorities like the State, he wants cooperation enforced by the internalized authority of "conscience" or the moral imperative of the anonymous authority of "public opinion". He clearly shows this when he writes: "Anarchists believe that we must start to build a different kind of society with a different kind of morality from that which has been handed down to us". In other words, let us abolish the authority of God and the State and replace it with the authority of Morality. This is not anarchism. It is simply substituting one kind of rulership for another.

Wooly thinking about morality and "freedom" is a basic trait of what passes for anarchism — but is more often a craving for a womb-society — as is wooly thinking about cooperation and competition. Invocations of the "common good" and "humanity" still cripple the perspectives of many professed opponents of authority. As long as it remains so long will their "anarchism" be nothing but

a variant of socialism, a castrated creature eternally torn between liberating the individual and stretching him on the rack of a new moral social order.