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The Afflictions of the Critics of the Ego

Errico Arrigoni

1920s

“What is a self?” asks Karl Marx. “Is it not an abstraction from a whole complex of social relations, of selves in relations?”

Would there be relations without the selves? If the self is an abstraction, what does Karl Marx use to build his State? The relations or the selves? Which is the concrete, and which is the abstraction? Without the selves there are no relations, no State, no... nothing.

“The I is a we, a colony of cells, an orchestra of inherited instincts,” says Victor Basch. “The particular I has no value... It exists only by and in other I’s with whom it forms a nation, a society, a State.”

The individual doesn’t claim to be the I of the cell, but the I formed by a colony of cells. That an I is formed by hereditary instincts doesn’t change it one iota.

It is still my I, formed by all the instincts that go into it.

It is still unique, and transitory, as no other I is like mine.

I am a world in myself, a unique world, in differing circumstances.

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As I am my exclusive I, under any circumstances and at any time, there let us ask:

Do the cells exist on account of the body? The musicians on account of the orchestra? The eggs on account of the omelette? Individuals on account of the State?

Who was there first?

The individual, being a body, cannot be split up, added to, or subtracted from, because then he would no longer be a whole individual.

The State and society can be split up, added to, and subtracted from, because they are not bodies - they are only artificial compositions, abstractions.

Try to fuse together many I's in order to form a super I, a State, a society. It can't be done. The individual cannot be dissolved.

Chain together millions of individuals to form a State, or a society. They still remain different worlds, a conglomerate of enslaved, crushed individuals, perhaps alike, but still whole worlds in themselves.

Destroy the individual and there is no more State or society.

Destroy the State, dissolve society, and the individual survives, because individuals are the irreplaceable ingredients that go to form a State or society.

A collection of obedient, tyrannized individuals is only a flock of sheep.

"The individual," says Bakunin (And what is he doing here among the enemies of the individual? Giving comfort to the authoritarians?) "is a product of society, and without society man is nothing."

Let's see... And without individuals society would be something? It would not exist, nor would the State. According to anthropological discoveries made in Abyssinia only a few months ago, man seems to be more than 3,000,000 years old. He originally lived without an organized society during most of these years and practically in isolation since there were so few human beings. And these prim-

itive relations - how old are they? 20,000; 50,000; 100,000 years? Again, the individual is the real thing.

“Society has been first,” says Kropotkin (Has he, too, got lost among the enemies of the individual?)

Let’s make it clear that Stirner is not against society, nor does he preach isolation, since the “union of egoists” is also a society. He is only against certain kinds of societies, the forced, the codified, the authoritarian societies. To these he opposes the free, the voluntary which is the union of egoists.

“The society of animals preceded that of man,” adds Kropotkin.

Of course, since many animals were in existence hundreds of millions of years before man developed. And since animals must have looked for protection under trees or in caves against bad weather (joined afterward by primitive man) there they found themselves in company. In a word, for physical and psychological comfort they found themselves in society with other animals.

But did such a “society” have morals? Did it have laws to tyrannize them? Did it have sanctions? Were there police forces, collectors of taxes, military service, jails, the curse of capitalists, commissars, priests, gods, states, churches?

No, they were simply societies of free egoists, meeting mostly accidentally, since they had to wander around looking for food, and in most cases, perhaps, the same animals never met a second time.

Stirner is not against altruism. Who thinks he is an altruist, let him be. It doesn’t bother Stirner. He thinks, first, that in most human actions real altruism is rarely met, because unconscious egoism is always discovered under it; second, that to appeal to altruism is the wrong way to try to achieve the emancipation of all individuals; third, that conscious self-interest based on free contracts is really the best and surest way for building a free, harmonious, and just society for everyone.

“The I of today,” says Sidney Hook, “is different from the I of yesterday... because the I is a different I in different conditions...

The I is an abstraction, because there is not an absolute I... In one I there are many concentrated I's."

What a discovery! And so my body of today is no more my body of yesterday? And whose body is it? Who represents my I of yesterday, represents it today, or will represent it tomorrow?

Am I no more I because every minute a few million cells die in me, and are replaced by new millions of cells?

An I in me, in you, dies every instant, and still we are me and you and nobody else. And it can never be otherwise.

We are ever dying, yet ever living, as I and you until our bodies disintegrate and vanish into nothingness. The nothingness of a dead I, a dead individual.

There are only transitory I's, each one born with each individual, and disappearing with each individual.

The absolute I? A fantasy! Stirner doesn't claim an absolute I, because that would be another spook, a creature born from the thought of an individual, pretending afterwards to be a body above him, something "sacred," a divinity.

There exists only the transitory I of me, of you - not two, not various. But if they are not absolute, they are unique.

And in spite of all the hatred the authoritarians feel towards the rebellious and iconoclastic individual, nobody can exterminate him or her... and survive.

The individual is here to stay. And so is (the) individualism.

No individualism, no anarchy. Because then there would be no real freedom - only a flock of tamed, enslaved individuals, no matter what you called it.