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Individualism, Anarchy, and Compassion

Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade

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One of the problems that individualist anarchists have in trying to promote acceptance of their ideas among other anarchists, as well as many non-anarchists, is that they are sometimes seen as being insufficiently compassionate. Individualists envision a future where personal freedom, self-reliance, independence, and private property are the order of the day, and some believe that such a society would not provide well for those unable to work or otherwise fend for themselves. But, while an individualist society would certainly not provide aid to those in need in the same way that the welfare state or an anarchist commune would, free individuals are just as capable of being helpful to others as are the members and institutions of other kinds of societies.

Individualists tend not to emphasize the social service aspects of anarchist society, instead talking about the freedom it would provide for independent and able people to live the way they wish, collaborating or cooperating with others when and where they choose to. Collectivists, on the other hand, often concentrate on what individuals will get from the community in an anarchist future, e.g.,

free education, free health care, communal food stores, etc. This difference arises from their different views of people. Individualists see people as generally capable of fending for themselves when not prevented from reaching their full potential by government and law, whereas collectivists view people as unable or unlikely to lead full and happy lives without a formal social network of responsibilities and benefits, even in a stateless world.

Individualists don't believe anyone "deserves" anything other than the full fruit of their labor, ownership of property acquired by means of this labor, fulfillment of any agreement freely entered into with others, and the freedom to be otherwise left alone. Despite this, individualists do acknowledge that some people, and perhaps most people at some time, will need assistance from others to get by because of unforeseen and/or unfortunate circumstances. And individualists do have ideas about how such people would be helped in a stateless society.

Long before the welfare state came into existence, fraternal societies existed in the United States which provided both formal and informal mutual aid in the form of life insurance, health insurance, survivors' benefits, old age housing, and other social services. And these societies, such as the Masons, the True Reformers, and the Ladies of the Maccabees, consisted largely of poor working people who banded together voluntarily to take care of themselves and their fellow members. These groups, of course, were in addition to the family and churches which were primary providers of reciprocal assistance before the government began providing social security and other benefits.

Similar voluntary associations and social networks could again provide the bulk of assistance for needy individuals in an anarchist society. There would, however, need to be different provisions made for those who were permanently unable to work or take care of themselves. But, just like vast numbers of Americans, despite heavy taxation to support government benefits, also contribute voluntarily to private charities, individuals in a stateless world would

also contribute to private organizations dedicated to the care of those unable to care for themselves.

There remains the question of those able, but unwilling, to provide for themselves. In an individualist society, unless those unwilling to work were able to convince some individual or group that their companionship or existence was worth the cost of their upkeep, they would have to either work or leave the community and seek more hospitable surroundings. It is unlikely, however, that even the most altruistic collective or commune would long tolerate slackers more gladly than would a group of individualists. Additionally, since the amount of work necessary to acquire the means to feed, clothe, and house oneself would probably not be nearly as much in any kind of future anarchist society as it is today, it is not unreasonable to expect everyone who is able to work for their keep.

Collectivists seem to believe that individuals and their private organizations cannot be trusted to be compassionate, and that, therefore, compassion must be socialized and administered by the community. Individualists, on the other hand, while perhaps not motivated primarily by compassion, work towards a world where people, as free individuals, can establish voluntary, overlapping networks to provide for all their needs and those of others. When free people are confronted with a problem, individualists believe, they will rise to the occasion. Although collectivists may talk more about the social benefits of anarchist society, individualists will provide them just as well, and in a freer setting.