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Anarchist Individualism as a Life and Activity

Émile Armand

1907

To say that the anarchist movement embraces several tendencies is not to put forward anything new, it would be surprising if it were otherwise. Non-political, outside of parties, this movement owes its existence solely to the individual personalities of which it is composed. Since there is no a priori anarchist programme, since there are only anarchists, it follows that each one of those who call themselves anarchists has his own conception of anarchism. Persecutions, difficulties and conflicts of all kinds, demand that whoever professes anarchism should be possessed of a mentality which is out of the ordinary, which is reflective, and which is in a state of continual reaction against a society composed of people who, on the contrary, are not reflective and are inclined to accept ready-made doctrines which make no demands on their intelligence. To ask that all anarchists should have similar views on anarchism is to ask the impossible. Hence a wealth of diverging conceptions are to be found among them.

As the word “anarchy” etymologically signifies the negation of governmental authority, the absence of government, it

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follows that one indissoluble bond unites the anarchists. This is antagonism to all situations regulated by imposition, constraint, violence, governmental oppression, whether these are a product of all, a group, or of one person. In short, whoever denies that the intervention of government is for human relationships is an anarchist.

But this definition would have only a negative value did it not possess as a practical complement, a conscious attempt to live outside this domination and servility which are incompatible with the anarchist conception. An anarchist, therefore, is an individual who, whether he has been brought to it by a process of reasoning or by sentiment, lives to the greatest possible extent in a state of legitimate defense against authoritarian encroachments. From this it that anarchist individualism — the tendency which we believe contains the most profound realization of the anarchist idea — is not merely a philosophical doctrine — it is an attitude, an individual way of life.

The anarchist individualist is not simply converted intellectually to ideas which will be realized one day some centuries hence. He tries now — for the present is the only time which matters for him — to practice his conceptions in everyday life, in his relations with his comrades, and in his contact with those others who do not share his convictions.

All healthy organisms have a characteristic tendency to reproduce themselves. Organisms which are sick, or in a process of degeneration, have no such tendency — and this applies to the mind as well as the body. So the anarchist individualist tends to reproduce himself, to perpetuate his spirit in other individuals who will share his views and who will make it possible for a state of affairs to be established from which authoritarianism has been banished. It is this desire, this will, not only to live, but also to reproduce oneself, which we shall call “activity”.

These considerations explain our title: “Anarchist Individualism as Life and Activity”. Tending to live his own individual

life at the risk of clashing intellectually, morally, and economically, with his environment, the anarchist individualist at the same time tries to like himself, are free from the prejudices and superstitions of authority, in order that the greatest possible number of men may actually live their own lives, uniting through personal affinities to practice their conceptions as far as is possible.

The anarchist individualist does not live in intellectual isolation. As individuals who share his ideas increase in number, so will his chances improve of seeing his aspirations realized, and as a result he will be happier. As individuals of his own “species” increase, so will the power of environment over his own life diminish. The wider his propaganda spreads and the more his activity grows, the more will his life be intensified.

His relationships with his comrades are based on reciprocity, on mutualism, on comradeship, and take numerous forms, all voluntary: free agreements of every type and in all spheres; respect for the pledged word and the carrying out of promises and engagements freely consented to. It is in this fashion that the individualist of our kind practices mutual aid in his species.

A conscious individual — seeking to create and select others — from being determined by his environment, he tends to become self-determining, to live his own life fully, to be active in the normal sense of the word. One cannot conceive the anarchist individualist in any other way.

In the first place, then, the anarchist is — in relation to all social conceptions based upon constraint — an individual who negates; anarchism is an individualist concept and a product of individuals. The anarchist is naturally an individualist.

The legalists base society upon law. In the eyes of the law those who constitute society are no more than ciphers. Whether the law proceeds from one man alone (autocracy), from several (oligarchy), or from the majority of the members of a society (democracy), the citizen must suppress even his

most rightful aspirations before it. The legalists maintain that if the individual subjects himself to the law, which allegedly emanates from society, it is in the interests of society and in his own interest since he is a member of society.

Indeed, society as we know it can be summarized as follows: The ruling classes, through the intermediary of the State, ensure that only their own views on culture, morality and economic conditions, are allowed to penetrate to the masses. They set up their own views in the form of civil dogmas, which no man may violate under pain of punishment, just as in former times, during the reign of the Church, there were severe penalties for daring to challenge religious dogmas. The State — the laic form of the Church — has replaced the Church which was the religious form of the State — but the aim of both has always been to form, not free beings, but true believers or perfect citizens. In other words slaves to dogma or law.

The anarchist replies that when solidarity is imposed from without it is worthless; that when a contract is enforced there is no longer any question of rights or duties; that coercion releases him from the bonds which attach him to a so-called society whose executives he knows only in the guise of administrators, law-givers, judges and policemen; that he supports only the solidarity of his everyday relationships. Fictitious and imposed solidarity is worthless solidarity.

The socialists base society upon economics. According to them the whole of life resolves itself into a question of production and consumption. Once you solve this problem you will automatically solve the human problem, with its complexity of intellectual and moral experiences. The individual may be conscious, he may be the greatest drunkard or the worst of comrades, but he is only of interest when considered as a producer or a consumer. The call goes out to all — to those who think and to those who do not. All have a right to the collectivist banquet, all have the right to the result of effort without to attempt the effort. It is necessary only to unite and to gasp

standing outside herd morality and conventional “good” and “evil” “a-social”. a “species” apart, one might say. They go forward, stumbling, sometimes falling, sometimes triumphant, sometimes vanquished. But they do go forward, and by living for themselves, these “egoists”, they dig the furrow, they open the broach through which will pass those who deny archism, the unique ones who will succeed them.

the power that will permit the seizure of society, and as soon as society has been seized, collectivism will be established and will function, willy-nilly, since any recalcitrants will be compelled to obey, otherwise they will disappear from circulation.

Socialism has been called the “religion of economics” and it is certain that a socialist metaphysic exists. This doctrine teaches that all the products of human activity are governed by economics. This is by no means difficult to grasp and is within the ability of every mentality. From the moment of its triumph socialism, in all its various shades, demands of its adherent that he be a good producer and a no less good consumer, putting his trust with regard to the organization of production and consumption in the wisdom of delegates, whether elected or imposed. Socialism is not concerned to make him an individual — it will make him an official.

The anarchist bases society neither upon the law nor upon economics. Good citizen, good bureaucrat, good producer, good consumer — this flour-spattered meal-trough has no message for him. After all, if it can be proved that in certain cases economics have determined intellect or morals, can it not also be proved that intellect or morals have often determined economics? And one should not pass in silence the role of the sexual factor.

The real truth must surely be that they mingle with and jostle one another; that they alternate and are mutually determined. From reformist socialism to revolutionary anti-parliamentary communism via trade unionism, all these socialist systems make a mockery of the individual and of free agreement between individuals. They give pride of place to the majority, to the economic contract imposed by the greatest number.

The anarchist proclaims that a transformation in mental outlook will always be accompanied by a transformation in the economic system; that a new social edifice cannot be built with stones that are crumbling into dust, that beings who have been

molded by prejudice can never build anything but a structure filled with prejudice, that it is necessary first of all to lay down solid materials, to select individuals.

If he joins a trades union, regardless of its colour, the anarchist enters it purely as a member of a particular trade, in the hope of obtaining by collective action an improvement in his own lot — but he will see nothing anarchistic in gaining a wage increase, or a reduction of working hours. From an economic point of view, under present conditions, each anarchist does what he thinks best for himself, one by working for a boss, another by acting outside the law: one benefits from the advantages obtained by association, another by participating in a “free milieu”, yet another by satisfying his needs as an artisan. None of these ways of getting by are more “anarchist” than the others — they are makeshifts, sometimes “evasions”, neither more nor less.

Since the anarchist conception places the individual at the base of all these practical consequences, it follows that it takes no heed of collective morality and the general pattern of life. The anarchist regulates his life not according to the law, like the legalists, nor according to a given collective metaphysic or mystique, like the religious, the nationalists or the socialists, for example, but according to his own needs and personal aspirations. He is ready to make the concessions necessary to live with his comrades or his friends, but without making an obsession of these concessions.

The anarchist knows full well that if his life is to be enjoyed to the full, if it is to be beautiful and rich in every kind of experience he will not be able to appreciate it if he is unable to master his inclinations and passions. He has no intention of turning his life into a sort of English garden, carefully cultivated, monotonous and dismal. No, he wants to live fully and intensely, he attaches a thousand horses to his chariot, but he does not forget to put a bridle on the neck of each one. The anarchist denies authority because he knows he can live with-

out it. He is guided by the play of agreements freely entered into with his comrades, never trampling on the liberty of any of them in order that none may trample on his.

But in relation to those whose amorphism, ignorance or interest interferes with his living his life, the individualist feels himself a stranger. Moreover, inwardly he remains refractory — fatally refractory — morally, intellectually, economically (The capitalist economy and the directed economy, the speculators and the fabricators of single are equally repugnant to him.) The full consciousness that none of his acts can debase him inwardly is for him a sufficient criterion. Surely the essential thing is that he remains himself?

Again, is not the anarchist constantly in a state of legitimate self-defense against constraint and social servitude?

Anarchist work, activity, and propaganda, therefore, do not consist of swaying the crowd, but of creating and selecting — my repetition is intentional — conscious individuals, free from prejudice. It is above all a work of undermining, of irony, of criticism, a work of education, but also a work of reconstruction, of the sculpting of a personality free from dominant Spooks. A work of free examination and of independent research in all fields. Instead of talking of love in general, the anarchist talks simply of unity and alliance between comrades, between friends, who feel attracted to each other by affinities of one kind or another, by reciprocity. Instead of postponing individual happiness to the socialist or communist calendars, he extols his present achievement of it by proclaiming the joy of living.

Instead of building the great structure of Harmony with material taken at random from the rubble amid the ruins of former buildings, he shows that the first task to be done is to remove the stones one by one from the great human arena.

Anarchists no more want to be masters than they want to be servants — they no more want to exercise violence than to submit to it. They expose, they propose, but they do not impose. They are pioneers attached to no party, non-conformists,