

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



# Individualism in Anarchism

Errico Malatesta

Errico Malatesta  
Individualism in Anarchism  
1897

*Complete Works of Errico Malatesta*, Volume III, ed. Davide  
Turcato

Translated by Paul Sharkey. This is a series of two articles originally published as “L’Individualismo nell’Anarchismo” in *L’Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, no. 6 (April 18, 1897), and “Ancora sull’Individualismo,” *L’Agitatore Socialista Anarchico* (April 25, 1897), single issue, replacement for no. 7 of *L’Agitatore*.

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)

1897



ing it to the collective endeavor, come the year's end we will discover that so much grain and such-and-such a number of machines have been produced, so many shoes and so many artichokes produced, enough to provide for everyone's needs... is tantamount to placing oneself in God's hands.

To conclude: man needs to live in society, and in order to live there he has to come to agreement with other men and cooperate with them. Either that cooperation will be achieved voluntarily, through free agreements, and will work to everybody's benefit; or it will be achieved through force, through the imposition of a few, and it will be exploited for the private benefit of whoever will have imposed it. Free and willing cooperation for the good of all is Anarchy. Enforced cooperation, chiefly for the benefit of certain given classes, is the authoritarian regime.

## Contents

<b>Individualism in Anarchism . . . . .</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>More on Individualism . . . . .</b>	<b>10</b>

And we refer not solely to “tastes and fancies” that are respectable, to be sure, but that are of secondary importance. Conflicts come about naturally when it comes to satisfying primal needs too, and it is up to men to do away with them or solve them for the greatest good of all. One might have a hankering or a need to eat some food that one can only get by depriving someone else of it, or of filling a position already occupied by somebody else, etc., etc. Provision can be made for every sort of foodstuff to be made available or for everyone to be accommodated, but *make provision we must*.

To claim that, naturally and without agreement, the desired stuff will be produced and one’s surroundings will be exactly as one wishes them to be, lays the groundwork for terrible disappointments. In practical terms, it means refraining from *doing* and thereby placing oneself in the position of having to put up with whatever others *will do*.

The same goes for work in general. Everyone is to work, they say, because work is necessary for health and there is the organic need to deploy one’s faculties; and that is true. What is not true, though, is that the need for such an exercise will exactly match men’s need for products, and will spontaneously adapt to the conditions determined by the instrument of production. If everyone were to believe that simply in doing what he likes best he is doing all he must, since everything will work fine anyway, then lots of necessary chores would certainly not be done, because no one likes to do them, and many other chores would not be done because, in order for them to get done, a number of men would have to reach agreements and abide by them.

It is true that the soil can abundantly feed its inhabitants and work can be so organized as to be a pleasure or, at worst, a mild exertion that everybody would readily perform; but it *needs* organizing. The belief that, with everybody working away randomly, when and how he sees fit, regardless of what others are doing and without coordinating his own activity or subordinat-

antagonisms. If destroyed, they would grow back, unless men make provisions for a different way of settling the conflicts that produced them once already.

And conflicts of interest and of passions exist and always will; for, even if the existing conflicts could be sufficiently removed that automatic agreement could arise, others would crop up at every new idea germinating in a human brain. Indeed, how can we imagine that when some new wish emerges in a man, the minds of his fellows alter immediately and in such a way as to dispose them to welcome his wish? How can we believe that every new notion is going to be promptly welcomed by everybody else? And will every new idea be right? Will nobody ever make a mistake any more? Or is it the supposition that the environment will have become so unvarying that it will suppress any initial difference between men and ensure that they will all simultaneously develop with mathematical identity? Then again, such a deadly uniformity would still need to be the deliberate construct of men, because nature, left to herself, is forever bringing forth new varieties!

We must not make do with empty verbiage. When it is said that “the liberty of one is not bounded but complemented by the liberty of others,” that is an affirmation of a sublime ideal, perhaps the most perfect ideal that can be assigned to social evolution. But if the intention is to assert a positive, actual fact, or one that would come to be by simply destroying the present institutions, that is just plainly mistaking objective reality for the ideals generated in our minds. Leaving aside the oppression that we as proletarians and as the ruled undergo, there are so many things that we might like to do but don’t, lest they displease and inconvenience others! We may voluntarily desist and indeed take pleasure from making sacrifices for the community; yet we would be happier if the others had different tastes and needs, ones that might allow us to do whatever we want. That goes to show that our liberty is time and time again bounded by the liberty of others.

## Individualism in Anarchism

We do not intend in this article to speak of those who, in calling themselves individualists, see that as justification for any repugnant action, and who have about as much to do with anarchism as the police do with the public order they boast to protect, or as the bourgeois do with the principles of morality and justice with which they sometimes try to defend their murderous privileges.

Neither is it our intention to speak of those comrades who style themselves “individualists about the means” and who, in the struggle we are fighting today, prefer or exclusively countenance individual action, either because they deem it more effective, or as a precaution, or again because they fear that any organization, any collective agreement, would curtail their freedom. We shall deal with that, which is partly a tactical issue and partly a question of principles, when we deal with the matter of organization.

Right now we want to say something about individualism as a philosophy, as a general appreciation of the nature of human societies and of the relations between individuals and groups, insofar as it is professed (sometimes virtually unwittingly) by a segment of our comrades.

There are those who call themselves individualists with the understanding that the individual is entitled to a complete physical, moral, and intellectual development and that he ought to find society a help, rather than a hindrance, in achieving the greatest possible happiness. But in that sense we are all individualists and it would be merely a matter of using one more word; and we do not use the word only because, having a range of other significations, it would only generate confusion. Not only are we anarchists or socialists of every persuasion individualists in the aforementioned sense, but so is everybody else, of whatever school or party; since the individual is the only sentient, conscious being, and every

time that we speak of enjoyment or suffering, freedom or slavery, rights, duties, justice, etc., all we ever have, all we ever can have in mind is living individuals.

Sometimes, therefore, it is just a straightforward question of words and there would be no point making a great deal out of it. But often there is a real and significant difference in ideas between those who subscribe to individualism and those who shun it; and it is important to set it out, because there are serious practical consequences flowing from this, even though the ultimate purposes of both groups may be the same. Not that there is any reason to look at one another askance and treat one another as adversaries, especially since, the moment that anarchists have tried to dabble in “philosophy,” such a muddle of ideas and words has arisen as to make it often impossible to make head or tail of whether or not we agree. But as a matter of urgency we need to explain ourselves properly, if for no other reason than to rid ourselves once and for all of such abstract notions that consume the entire activity of certain comrades to the serious detriment of real propaganda work.

Scrutinizing everything that has been said and written by the individualist anarchists, we detect the coexistence of two underlying and mutually contradictory notions, which lots of them do not state explicitly, but which, in some form or another, keep cropping up—often, too, in the thinking of many anarchists who are not inclined to describe themselves as individualists.

The first of these consists of seeing society as an aggregate of autonomous individuals, entire unto themselves and capable of doing for themselves, who have no reason to be together other than their own advantage and who might part ways once they find that the benefits that society has to offer are not worth the sacrifices in personal freedom that it demands. In short, they look upon human society as a sort of trading company that leaves, or should leave, each shareholder free to join or to pull out as he sees fit. Today, they say, since a handful of individ-

cosmic order; but if we could ask the mice, we might well find that such harmony is much too jarring for their liking. It is a law of nature that living beings must eat and therefore the numbers and strength of the living are limited by the quantum of foods suited to each species; but nature indifferently enforces her limits by means of disasters, deaths by starvation, and degeneracy. And an infinite number of examples could be cited.

In order to argue that nature is superior to art, Charles Fourier employs an odd comparison that has, through repetition, become a classic.<sup>2</sup> Fill a vase with pebbles of various colors, give them a shake, then pour them out on to a table, and you will have a combination of colors more beautiful than any painter could have devised. And that may well be the case... but you certainly won't get Titian's *Madonna*; you won't get what you would like, even if it were something ugly; this is the key point.

The fact is that the mysterious law by which nature, as providential provider, would arrange things to suit men's tastes is a nonsense contradicted by all the evidence and it cannot withstand a moment's scrutiny. Fatalism may still be conceivable, no matter how much it contradicts all the motives that drive us; but optimistic fatalism, an intelligent Fate concerned with the happiness of human generations, is downright inconceivable!

And why would any such law of harmony have dallied for so many myriad centuries just to take effect once we proclaim anarchy?

The State and private property are definitely the greatest causes of social antagonisms today: but those institutions cannot have been brought to life by some miraculous suspension of the laws of nature, and must be the effects of pre-existing

---

<sup>2</sup> French socialist Charles Fourier (1772–1837) strove to devise a systematic doctrine of “universal harmony,” which would allegedly arise from the unfettered release of human passions. (Turcato)

## More on Individualism

We said in the previous issue that *harmonism*—the faith in a natural law that makes all things automatically accommodate themselves to one another for the best—underpinned the thinking of the individualists and was the only way of reconciling their warm and heartfelt craving for the good of all with their ideal of a society in which each person enjoys *absolute* freedom without any need to enter into compacts or reach compromises with others.

To tell the truth, an element of *harmonism*, or, to put it another way, of *optimistic fatalism*, can be traced in every anarchist and maybe in every modern socialist from the most widely differing schools. The causes behind this are various and conflicting: to some degree, the survival of the religious ideas according to which the world was made and laid out for the benefit of men; to some extent, the influence of economists who strove to justify the bourgeoisie's privileges in terms of some alleged harmony of interests; to some extent, the almost exclusive popularity to which the natural sciences had risen; plus the desire to make matters look beautiful and easy, for propaganda purposes, and the convenience of being able to skip over difficulties without having to tackle and resolve them. And individualists are just to be blamed, or praised, for having drawn the logical conclusions of everybody's mistake.

But the fact that pretty much everybody erred is no reason to persist in the error.

The so-called harmony that is to be found in nature signifies only this: the very existence of something means that the conditions necessary and sufficient for it to exist have been in place. But nature has no purpose, or at any rate, none of men's purposes; she cares nothing for the deaths, hurts, and sufferings of human beings and these may very well serve as components of her "harmony." The cat eating the mouse is a natural phenomenon and thus perfectly in harmony with the

uals have bagged all the natural or man-made wealth, all the rest are duty bound to abide by the rules enforced by society or by those who prevail within society. But if the land, if the instruments of labor were freely available to all, and if the people were not thrust into slavery by the organized might of one class, nobody would have any reason to remain within society if his interests were otherwise. And since, once man's material needs have been met, his over-riding need is for freedom, any form of coexistence that requires even the slightest sacrifice of the individual will is to be shunned. *Do what thou wilt*, taken in the narrowest and most absolute sense of the phrase, is the supreme principle, the only rule governing behavior.

Then again, assuming the existence of autonomous individuals with absolute, unbounded freedom, it follows that as soon as there is a clash of interests and as soon as wishes vary, strife ensues. In that strife some will be victors and some will be vanquished, and so we are back to the oppression and exploitation meant to be banished.

Thus the individualist anarchists, second to none in their burning desire for the good of all, needed a way of more or less logically reconciling the permanent good of everybody and the principle of undiluted freedom of the individual. And they came up with it by espousing another principle: that of *harmony by natural law*.

Do what thou wilt: but the fact is, they say, that, unsolicited and *naturally*, you will want only that which cannot infringe the equal rights of others to do as they wish.

A friend writes: "Our freedom, unfolding through the complete range of human faculties, will never trespass against the freedom of others. Just as the stars, gravitating around their own centers follow special trajectories, so men may follow their own line of freedom without ever overlapping and without descending into chaos." And others, substituting physiology for astrology, speak of a "sympathetic agglomeration of cells in plants and animals"; and still others of the formation

of crystals and so on, through the entire gamut of the natural sciences. No one seems to remember, even though these may be encountered in nature, misshapen or failed crystals, the struggle for survival, cosmic catastrophes, diseases, abortions, and the entire endless parade of disasters and hurts.

Disharmony and conflict of interests are the result of existing institutions. Destroy the State: respect complete freedom of trade, of banking, of minting; let title to ownership of the land be bound by the obligation to cultivate or otherwise work it in person; let us have free, completely free competition—say the individualist anarchists of Tucker’s school—and peace will prevail in the world. Economic rent, which is to say the difference in value, in terms of productivity and position, of the various tracts of land will vanish *naturally* and competition will lead *naturally* to the wisest use of nature’s blessings for the benefit of all.<sup>1</sup>

Destroy the State and private property, say the individualist anarchists of the communist school (and there is such a thing, despite the seeming contradiction in terms)—and everything will go well: everybody will agree *naturally*; everybody will work because work is a physiological need; production will always and *naturally* meet consumer demand and there will be no need for either rules or agreements because... with everybody doing as he pleases, it will turn out that, quite unknowingly and unintentionally, he will have done precisely what the rest wanted him to.

So, delving right to the very bottom of things, it turns out that individualist anarchism is nothing but a sort of *harmonism* and *providentialism*.

In our view, the underlying principles of individualism are entirely wrong.

---

<sup>1</sup> The American anarchist Benjamin Tucker (1843–1939) set out his thinking mainly in the pages of the review *Liberty*, which he edited from 1881 until 1908, and from which he published the 1893 book entitled *Instead of a Book*. (Turcato)

The individual human being is not a being independent of society, but is rather the product of it. But for society, he would never have been able to hoist himself out of the realms of brutish animality and become truly human, and, outside of society, could not help but slide more or less quickly back into primitive animality.

When Dr. Stockmann, the protagonist of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, irked at not being understood and followed by the public, exclaimed “The strongest man is he who stands most alone,” he just made a downright blunder, even though he has been taken as anarchist whereas he was merely an aristocrat. If he knew more than the rest and was capable of more than the rest, that was because, more than the rest, he had lived a life in intellectual communication with men present and past, because, more than the rest, he had reaped the benefits of society—and thus, owed society a greater debt.

In society a man may be free or a slave, happy or unhappy, but in society he must remain because that is the context of his being a man. Therefore, instead of aspiring to some notional and impossible autonomy, he should look for the basis of his freedom and happiness in the agreement with his fellow men, joining with the rest to adjust those social institutions that do not suit him.

Likewise, the belief in some natural law, whereby harmony is automatically established between men without any need for them to take conscious, deliberate action, is hollow and utterly refuted by the facts.

Even if the State and private property were to be done away with, harmony does not come to pass automatically, as if Nature busies herself with men’s blessings and misfortunes, but rather requires that men themselves create it.

But if we are to make ourselves understood, we shall have to speak of this at some length... and our readers are already whining about our articles being unduly lengthy.

Another time, then.