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Mutualism

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Mutualism is a social and economic theory, most often associated with anarchism, which traces its roots to the writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. In place of political institutions Proudhon advocated economic organizations based upon principles of mutualism in labour and exchange, through co-operatives and “People’s Banks,” as means towards that end. The consequences of this reorganization of social life include the limiting of constraint, the reduction of repressive methods, and the convergence of individual and collective interests. This Proudhon calls “the state of total liberty” or anarchy and suggests that it is the only context in which “laws” operate spontaneously without invoking command and control. Mutualists follow Proudhon in envisioning future social organizations as economic rather than political. They see society as organized around free federations of producers, both rural and urban. Any co-ordination of efforts must be voluntary and reasoned.

Mutualists differ from other anarchists, as well as from most communists and socialists, in allowing for the existence of private property and even money, in a post-capitalist society. Mutualists are less concerned with private property than with the monopoly

control of property by corporate interests backed by the state. They argue that a large proportion of the wealth created through social and technological development in a market economy becomes concentrated in the hands of monopolists by way of economic rents. This concentrated, unearned and unproductive, wealth is the primary cause of poverty in capitalist economies. Collecting private profit by restricting access to natural resources, upon which all depend for survival amounts to a system of theft and slavery. This is made even worse given that productive activity, such as industrial works were burdened by taxes while land values were not. Natural resources are the product of nature rather than human labor or initiative and as such should not provide the basis by which individuals acquire revenues. Nature as the common heritage of all humanity must be made a common property of society as a whole.

For mutualists everyone is entitled to the products of their directly applied labor, through individually or collectively controlled means of production, and payment should reflect socially produced value. Mutualists advocate for a “free market” unsupported by the state force or laws that allow and protect concentrated wealth. This includes a labor market in which people choose, without coercion, to work for others, for themselves or co-operatively. A mutual credit bank provided money to facilitate this scheme. Unlike communism which advocates exchange on the basis of the maxim “from each according to ability, to each according to need,” mutualism advocates trade on the basis of equivalent amounts of labor.

A distinction is sometimes drawn between individualist, or philosophical, anarchism, with its emphasis on individual liberty and personal transformation, or communist anarchism, with its emphasis on equality and collective mobilization for broad social change. Mutualism is often viewed as a mid-level perspective between these two approaches. Philosophical anarchism places greater emphasis on individual freedom to act unfettered by the constraints of social mores and norms. While placing less

emphasis on the individual, and emphasizing co-operative labor, mutualism also differs from social anarchism in its distrust of large-scale social organization, especially the mass organizing for radical or revolutionary social change preferred by socialists and social anarchists.

Mutualists understand anarchism not as a revolutionary establishment of something new, a leap into the unknown, or as a break with the present. Rather, they regard anarchism as the realization of anti-authoritarian practices of mutual aid and solidarity that are already present in society, but which have been overshadowed by state authority. As Paul Goodman suggested, anarchism is the extension of spheres of freedom until they make up the majority of social life. Starting from this perspective mutualists seek to develop non-authoritarian and non-hierarchical relations in the here-and-now of everyday life.

Mutualist anarchism, unlike that of anarchist communism, is based on gradual, non-violent, rather than revolutionary, social and cultural change. In place of force, Benjamin Tucker advocated the liberation of the individual’s creative capacities. Tucker looked to gradual enlightenment through alternative institutions, schools, cooperative banks and workers’ associations, as practical means to enact change. Social change, for Tucker, required personal transformation first and foremost but at the same time, while rejecting force, which he termed domination, Tucker did assert the right of individuals and groups to defend themselves.

Proudhon’s notions of People’s Banks and local currencies have returned in the form of LETS (Local Exchange and Trade Systems). In North America, 19th Century mutualist communes, such as those of Benjamin Tucker, find echoes in the autonomous zones and squat communities of the present day.

Recent and contemporary theorists who in places present versions of mutualism include Paul Goodman, Colin Ward, and Kevin Carson.