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A defense of social individualism

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What Is Social Individualism

A defense of social individualism

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Social Individualism is the combination of both the importance of the individual and the importance of the group. Is the belief that both must be combined. Both groups and the individuals who make it up are equally important. Both (traditional) individualism, with it's focus on the individual, and (traditional) collectivism, with it's focus on the group, are not only wrong but actually two sides of the same coin.

Individualists often claim that "there is no society, only individuals." But this is untrue, there are not only individuals but also relations and interactions between those individuals. Humans do not exist in a vacuum but interact with other humans from the time we are born. Groups and associations are an essential part of life; individuals cannot discuss or live by themselves. By cooperating together individuals can achieve goals which would be more difficult (or impossible) on their own and to improve their situation. Forming groups enables individuals to meet their needs and coordinate their actions. Individualism actually leads to forms of collectivism such as capitalist companies. Because of their abstract narrow focus on the individual individualists do not see any signifi-

gant difference between groups structured in hierarchical or non-hierarchical manners. As such they generally end up supporting hierarchical organizations which in practice operate in a very collectivist manner. How a group is organized has a great deal of effect on the individuals in that group; hierarchical organization tends to destroy their individuality. In hierarchical organizations individuals are subordinated to those on the top of the hierarchy and expected to obey them. This destroys the individuality of those in the organization; instead of thinking and acting for themselves they are turned into drones who obey the great leader(s). This leads to collectivist results, with individuality destroyed. Capitalism is actually a very collectivist system; it turns the majority of the population into worker-drones who obey their wealthy masters. Individuality is reduced to choosing between pepsi and coke.

For the purposes of this essay “collectivism” refers to the idea that the interests of the individual must be subordinated to that of the group (the term can mean other things in different contexts). The most obvious problem with this idea is that groups are made up of individuals; putting those same individuals above themselves is absurd and self-contradictory. You can’t subordinate them to themselves, that’s the same as not subordinating them at all. What this really means in practice is subordinating most of the individuals in the group to other individuals in the group. A hierarchy is created with some individuals controlling other individuals. The “interests of the group” (often called “the common good” or “national interest” or some other euphemism) really means the interests of those on the top of the hierarchy. Collectivist ideology acts to legitimize hierarchy and solidify the control of those on the top by demanding that those on the bottom subordinate themselves to the “common good” which means the interests of those on the top. The interests of the elite are falsely equated with the interests of everyone in the group. A common defense of this is that individuals and groups need coordination, which is often true, but this does not mean that we need a hierarchy or any kind of centraliza-

tion; it is entirely possible for individuals and groups to coordinate their actions without hierarchy based on voluntary cooperation. Collectivism actually results in an odd form of individualism, the cult of personality and leader worship. This is not surprising, since all individuals in the group are expected to suppress their own individuality in order to do “what’s best for the group” (which is a euphemism for what’s best for those on the top). Those on the top are thus the only ones with the individuality necessary to make decisions and leader worship develops partly out of this. This can be observed in practice by looking at the various Marxist and Fascist regimes, all of which suppressed the individuality of everyone but the great leader, whose individuality was taken to an extreme and glorified. Even small Marxist and fascist groups, not whole regimes, tend to exhibit this tendency.

Usually individualists value freedom over equality, while collectivists do the reverse. Social individualism, on the other hand, values both. Opponents of freedom often claim freedom must be limited because the freedom of different people conflicts with each other. For example, the freedom of one man to own slaves conflicts with the freedom of the slaves to be free. The problem with this is that it is based on an overly broad conception of freedom. To consider the ability to own slaves “freedom” is a rather perverted conception of freedom. Freedom should properly be conceived of as control over one’s own life; I am free when I control my own life instead of being bossed around by others. Control of other people (whether this is slavery or some other form of control) is not freedom but hierarchy. Human beings do not exist in a vacuum but constantly interact with each other, which is where equality comes in. In order for social relations to be characterized as free they must also be equal. Opponents of equality like to invent all sorts of straw men about equality meaning some totalitarian society where everyone is forced to be identical in every way and other nonsense. Few advocates of equality, even hardline collectivists, advocate everyone being identical in every way. Equality is a social relation in

which all have equal power and wealth; it does not mean everyone being identical. Inequalities of wealth tend to create inequalities of power and vice versa.

Equality is necessary to have freedom and vice versa. If there is no equality then some people do not have as much power as others and are thus subordinated to them; there is a hierarchy. If some are subordinated to others then there isn't freedom because those subordinated do not have control over their own lives; some people have control over other people. Equality is a requirement for freedom. The inverse is also true; freedom is a requirement for equality. If there is no freedom then there is a hierarchy, some have control over (and thus more power) than others. If there is a hierarchy then there is no equality because some people have more power/wealth than people. Far from being mutually contradictory, (individual) freedom and (social) equality are two sides of the same coin. The usual argument that freedom and equality conflict is based on overly broad conceptions of freedom (or straw men of equality). Typically this involves including private property as part of freedom. Private property obviously conflicts with equality but it also conflicts with freedom. Private property means some, the owners, dominate others and is thus not compatible with freedom. Thus removing private property (and any other form of hierarchy) from freedom means that it is not compatible with equality.

Both individualism and collectivism are two sides of the same authoritarian coin. By focusing only on freedom and rejecting (or downplaying) equality individualism ends up opposing freedom as well. By focusing only on equality and rejecting (or downplaying) freedom collectivism ends up opposing equality as well. Both oppose freedom and equality and act to legitimize authoritarian social relations whereby a small elite dominates and exploits the majority of the population. Neither individuals nor groups are more important than the other nor do they conflict with each other. To value one over the other is just a veiled apology for authoritarianism.