

Concerning an Antinomy

Ricardo Mella

1912

The historical antagonism of political and philosophical struggles is reproduced in the social struggles of our day. Proudhon's genius, the greatest revolutionary dialectic, conclusively pointed out the antinomy within which human life finds itself caught. Everything—facts, events, feelings and ideas—appears as if it had two faces, two opposite and irreducible terms. It could be said that the principle of contradiction is the essence of life itself.

Contemporary struggles, both in the realm of the ideal and in that of the real, though different in orientation and content, are equal in their fundamental terms to those of all epochs. In the midst of the aspirations of social renewal, the associationist trend and the autonomist tendency lead to an unequal combat. Ideals range from the assertion of independent individuality to the consecration of the mass, the all-powerful collective. Social practices reflect at every instant the anger of the individual in rebellion and the arrogance of the overwhelming multitude. The antinomy, the contradiction, is flagrant between the conquered and the conqueror. There is a dissolving and dispersing force called individualism, a conglomerating and conservative force called socialism or societarianism. At bottom, whatever names we use, there is an obvious opposition between unity and totality.

It is true that the association principle, common to all social schools, differs essentially from the closed-minded affirmation of collective sovereignty. But in practice they are confused and combined, due to the preponderance of the gregarious spirit and the education of herd. Conscious associationism, which derives from the free will of the autonomous individual, is still a distant reality, a topic for future ages. The people march, mechanically grouped, now as before, whatever their ideal aspirations might be.

Because of hereditary background, as much as through the influence of the environment, by no means renewed at this point, the antinomy between individuality and association continues to stand in favor of the undisputed and overwhelming sovereignty of the multitude. In general, individuals seem happy to immerse themselves and disappear into the motley and undefined body of the mass, the crowd, the army, the party or any association whatsoever. Few are zealous of the protection of their personalities—few and commonly taken to be crazy and eccentric.

And yet, many call themselves autonomists. They proclaim great and incontestable truths regarding human liberation; they want to dignify and ennoble the individual. But when push comes to shove they surrender to the habits of routine and are submerged, forgetful of themselves, in the mob that overwhelms, like an impetuous current, all obstacles.

Usually the screen of solidarity and association is put forward. But solidarity, when it is not the result of personal deliberations and determinations of the conscious will, does not differ from charity and Christian pietism. Association, when it is not the result of a free contract between equals, is no different from blind, automatic subordination to the will of others. Solidarity and association do not require individual sacrifice; they do not obstruct independence. This need and this negation have their roots in the remnants of voluntary submission and compliance with imposed authority.

The antinomy exists anyway, because without personal independence the individual is annulled and without the association of individuals life is impossible.

To escape this impasse by submitting to the group or by denying it, is to cut the knot. And what is needed is to untie it.

To untie it is to remain autonomous and to cooperate voluntarily, to come together, to show solidarity in a common work.

To speak of associationism means speaking of the deliberate acts of free wills. Anything else is subordination, regimentation and slavery. It is not, in short, association in any sense.

No one who is not free is associated; they submit. One who is not free is a subject and cannot, therefore, contract, deliberate and determine their actions. Every agreement entails the freedom and prior equality of the contracting parties. The pact between equal and free beings resolves the antinomy, consecrating independence and realizing solidarity.

Such is, ultimately, the anarchist principle.

Socialism that is protected by the State, society or any other form of grouping, may speak of freedom, but this freedom will be conditioned in such a way that it would be worth speaking frankly of forced subordination to the sovereignty of the community. And at this point, whoever values their personal freedom will necessarily incline towards anarchism.

Apart from it, every promise of true liberation is fallacious and deceitful.

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Retrieved on 6th May 2023 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Published in *El Libertario*, núm. 10. Gijón, 12 October 1912. Working translation by Shawn P.
Wilbur.

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