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Free Cooperation and Communities

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A translation of “Cooperation libre et communautés” (*Temps Nouveaux*, Literary Supplement, October, 1900) by Shawn P. Wilbur.

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I mean by “free cooperation” the voluntary contribution of an indeterminate number of individuals to a common end, through a system of community, every social arrangement resting on common property in things. Each time that I use the expression “systems of community,” it will be to designate some or all of the plans for community that are preconceived or, what amount to the same thing, determined *a priori*.

Among us anarchists, there are communists, collectivists and anarchists without any qualifying term. Under the name of “anarchist socialism,” there exists an equally important group that rejects all doctrinal exclusivity and accepts a program of dismissing in principle all divergences. The name *socialist*, by its generic character, is more acceptable than any other.

However, in fact, doctrinal differences persist, so it is useful to subject the idea to an impartial analysis and to seek to establish agreement by eliminating the causes of the divergences.

Apart from the individualist faction, we are all socialist anarchists and all in favor of community. I say all, because collec-

tivism, as the Spanish anarchists understand it, is only a degree of the community of which, in their turn, those who call themselves communists do not reject a single word. So there is a common principle. The different names that we give ourselves indicate nothing other than different interpretations, since for all, the primordial principle is the possession in common of the earth, the instruments of labor, etc., ...

The differences loom up as soon as it is a question of the mode of production and the division of wealth.

The disparity of opinions appears noticeable, because, through education, we tend to become dogmatic and because each, today, attempts to systematize their future society, neglecting the anarchist idea itself to some degree.

In my opinion, such a disparity, born of preferences for determined systems, is not reasonable. I mean that the act of advocating these systems is contradictory to the radical principle of liberty and that it is not essential to the propagation of our ideas.

It is very simple to make the least cultivated people understand that things will be done in a particular manner in the future, but that only serves to reaffirm their authoritarian education and make them believe that we will act in a certain manner and not in another.

We say to them so casually that each will enjoy the full product of their labor, or that each will take what is necessary for them, wherever they find it; but what is harder to explain is the manner by which we will proceed without causing harm to anyone and especially how all men will come to agreement in order to act according to one method or another.

We must, on the contrary, penetrate skulls with the idea that everything should happen, everywhere and always, in conformity to the will of the associates, and we strive to make well understood the absolute necessity that exists of leaving individuals a complete independence of action. It is certainly not

by stuffing brains with preconceived plans that we will prepare them for anarchist education.

That last task is more complicated than the preceding one. It makes less easy the comprehension of anarchist ideas, but it is that idea that corresponds to the affirmation of a better world, where authority will be reduced to nothing.

That manner of understanding propaganda being certainly common to all of us, I believe that we do useful work by all contributing to orienting it more each day in an anti-dogmatic and antiauthoritarian direction.

If we affirm that liberty must consist, for each group and each individual, in being able to act autonomously in every moment, and if we all affirm it, it is clear that we desire the means with the aid of which such an autonomy will be practicable. And, because we desire these means, we are obviously socialist and affirm that the common possession of wealth is just and necessary, for without the community that signifies the equality of means, the autonomy would be impracticable.

We mean, we believe, without contest, by the community of wealth, the possession in common of all the things put thus at the free disposal of groups and individuals. That supposes that it would be necessary to establish the agreement necessary for the methodical use of that ability to freely dispose of things.

The search for the possible forms of that accord give rise to the different schools of which it has been a question.

Will it be necessary, despite our purely socialist affirmations, to systematize life in full anarchy? Will it be necessary to decide today on a special system of communist practice? Must we work at the establishment of an exclusive method? If that was [the case], it would be to justify the existence of as many anarchist fractions as there are economic ideas dividing our opinions.

On the other hand, we will demonstrate that with such intentions we want a bit more than the equality of means as guar-

antee of liberty. We will demonstrate that we try to give a rule to liberty itself, or rather to its exercise.

To systematize the exercise of autonomy is a contradiction. Free is the individual, free is the group; nothing can oblige them to adopter such and such a system of social life. Besides, nothing would be powerful enough to impress a uniform direction on the production and distribution of wealth.

Because we affirm the total individual and collective autonomy, we must admit as a consequence the ability to proceed as we intend it, the possibility that some act in one manner and other in another. It is the evidence of multiple practices, the diversity of which will not be an obstacle to the result of social peace and harmony to which we aspire. So we should admit in summary the principle of free cooperation, based on the equality of means, without it being necessary to go farther into the practical consequences of the idea.

Why must anarchism be communist or collectivist?

Just the enunciation of these words produces in our mind the image of a preconceived plan, of a closed system, and who, anarchists, are not dogmatic; we do not advocate infallible panaceas; we do not construct on the shifting sands these fragile castle that the slightest wind of the near future will suffice to demolish. We spread liberty in fact, the possibility of working in all times and all places. That possibility will be effective for the people as soon as it is found in possession of the wealth and it can dispose of it without anyone, nor anything being able to oppose it. It will be that much more effective as the people can better and more freely consult one another concerning the means of organizing the production and distribution of wealth put at its disposition.

We could then say to the people: Do what seems good to you; group yourself as you please; regulate your relations for the use of wealth as you think best; organize the free life as you know it and as you are able... Then, under the influence of diverse opinions, under the influence of climate and race, under

very midst of this system, by not conforming itself to it and by arranging it as much as possible according to the tastes, necessities and opinions in question. It was thus in the past, is so today, and will be the same tomorrow, we believe.

In the face of the systematic variability and all the exclusivisms of doctrine, I believe I have established that the corollary of anarchy is the free cooperation in which every practice of community has the space suitable to it.

The struggles of doctrinal exclusivism languish at present. My desire is to have contributed to making them disappear entirely.

The affirmation of the method of free cooperation is purely anarchist, and it will teach to those who come to us that we decree neither dogmas nor systems for the future, and that anarchy is not an appearance of liberty, but liberty itself, liberty in action.

dozen individuals, while others are all divided in little parcels. Here large industry prevails, there the ancient artisan persists, laboring in their little workshop.

The transmission of property dons the most varied forms. As for the tithes taken by the lord who enjoys an absolute right, they have disappeared or are transformed in certain places, while in others they persist.

Is it necessary to note that no so-called civilized State is totally individualistic? Despite the right of use and abuse of things, the public power invades the right of the citizens at each step. For cause of general utility, we establish expropriation and we thus fall back onto the communist principle of the right of the collectivity.

On the other hand, a considerable portion of wealth is consumed in common in the civilized countries and a great number of communistic institutions exist, which live in the midst of modern individualism.

I believe it is useless to add proofs that are accessible to everyone; I limit myself to indicating a process and drawing the conclusions.

Some experiments set out, I deduce that the future will develop according to a general principle, that of the common or collective possession (the two terms being, for me, equivalent) of wealth, and that, practically, this principle translates into various methods of production, distribution and consumption, all methods of free cooperation.

That same deduction results immediately from the principle of liberty that is so dear to us. And now, I can add that the diversity of individualist or communist experiments, contained in the past and in the present, is only the necessary consequence of the principle of liberty surviving in the human species, despite all the coactions. The individual, just like the group, always tends to regulate its existence, to rule itself according to its opinions, tastes and necessities. And then even when it is reduced to an imposed system, it sets its existence free, in the

that of the physical environment and the social milieu, produce activity in multiple directions. Various methods will be applied and thus, in the long run, experience and the necessities will determine the harmonic and universal solutions of social life. We will obtain, by experiment, at least a part of what we would certainly not obtain with all the discussions and intellectual efforts possible.

The affirmation that everything is for all in no way implies that each can dispose of everything arbitrarily or in conformity to a given rule. That only means that wealth being at the free disposition of individuals, the organization of the enjoyment of things is left to the initiation of these latter.

The search for the forms of such an organization is certainly useful and necessary, but especially by way of study and not by means of an imposed doctrine; the same search would not and should not result in a unanimity of opinions. It is not necessary that it determines a social *credo*. In matters of opinion it is necessary to know how to respect all, and the freedom to put them into practice is the best guarantee of that respect.

In a society like the one that we recommend, the diverse nature of the labors will oblige the members in every case to charge themselves in turn with the sole of the execution of certain tasks. In other cases, the *voluntariat* will be necessary. So it is necessary that a group concerns itself permanently with the those labors; others will be accomplished in turn by various groups. Here, the distribution could follow the communist process that abandons it to the necessities or, to put it better, to the will of individuals; there, it will be necessary to resolve voluntarily to some one rule, like rationing or something approaching it. Who could claim to be capable of embracing the whole of the future life?

One could tell me that all of this account is simply communism; in this case, collectivism is also communism and vice versa. There is no more than a difference of degrees, and what

I seek to prove is the contradiction into which we fall when, to the term anarchy, we associate a closed, invariable, uniform system, subject to some predetermined rules.

Even though there will exist in the brain of each among us that spirit of broad liberty, that general criterion that I designate under the name of free cooperation, the practical result will demonstrate that to the terms collectivism, communism, etc., are more or less associated the idea of a complete plan of social life, apart from which everything is only an error.

Our struggles come precisely from having associated certain ideas with certain terms where exclusivism is affirmed, and when propaganda lets itself be invaded by the particularities of school, the result is fatal, for instead of making conscious anarchists, we make fanatics for communism A, or fanatics for communism B, fanatics, in a word, of a dogma, whatever it may be.

To the reasons that we could call [matters] of internal order, already put forward, I should add others, of the general order, which will corroborate my deductions.

Present experience and the historical experience of which that of the future will only be the corollary, will be drawn in.

How can one desire that one system could or can predominate? Facts are far from following invariable rules. The principle is generally one, but the practical experiments vary noticeably and distance themselves from the point of departure. From the communism of some peoples we can only obtain a characteristic ideal. In the facts, there is not one communism like another communism. In all places concessions are made to individualism, but to very differing degrees. The regulation of life oscillates from free agreement to the most repugnant despotism. From the free communities of the Eskimos to the authoritarian communism of the ancient Peruvian empire, the distance is enormous. However, the practices of communism derive from a single principle: the absolute right of the collec-

tivity, which, in the governmental countries, is transformed into the absolute right of the prince assuming the representation and the rights of the aforesaid. That principle cannot, however, persist without essential limits. From all sides the limits on the profit of individuality are numerous. In certain cases, the house and garden are private property. In other cases, the community only extends to a portion of the earth, the other parts being reserved to the State and to the priests and warriors. Finally, the Eskimos, in their free communism, recognize the right of the individual to separate from the community and establish themselves elsewhere, hunting and fishing at their own, sole risk. By continuing this excursion in the domain of sociology and history, we easily understand how difficult it is to explain that such contrary practices proceed from a common principle.

In the same manner, the individualist regime in many cases finds itself in some regions closer to communism than to individualism properly speaking. Property, often, is reduced to possession or to the usufruct that the State, at will, grants or takes away. In other cases, the enjoyment of the earth is allocated by periodic repartitions, because, theoretically, we say that the soil belongs to everyone.

If we analyze the present experience of industrial or agricultural individualism, we see that the principle, or rule, is one: the right to exclusive and absolute property in things, but that the methods of applications vary from country to country and from city to city.

Despite the concern for unification of the legislators, [and] the absorbing and unitarist power of the State, the laws are a veritable "maremagnum" and the habits and customs in industry, commerce and agriculture are so opposite, that what is equitable in one place is taken for unjust in another.

There are countries where association performs miracles and others where individuals prefer to struggle on their own accounts. Some entire regions belong to one single nation or to a