

The Individualist and the Communist

A Dialogue

Rosa Slobodinsky and Voltairine de Cleyre

1891

INDIVIDUALIST: "Our host is engaged and requests that I introduce myself to. I beg your pardon, sir, but have I not the pleasure of meeting the Communist speaker who addressed the meeting on Blank street last evening?"

COMMUNIST: "Your face seems familiar to me, too."

INDIVIDUALIST: "Doubtless you may have seen me there, or at some kindred place. I am glad at the opportunity to talk with you as your speech proved you to be somewhat of a thinker. Perhaps—"

COMMUNIST: "Ah, indeed, I recognize you now. You are the apostle of capitalistic Anarchism!"

INDIVIDUALIST: "Capitalistic Anarchism ? Oh, yes, if you choose to call it so. Names are indifferent to me; I am not afraid of bugaboos. Let it be so, then, capitalistic Anarchism."

COMMUNIST: "Well, I will listen to you. I don't think your arguments will have much effect, however. With which member of your Holy Trinity will you begin: free land, free money, or free competition?"

INDIVIDUALIST: "Whichever you prefer."

COMMUNIST: "Then free competition. Why do you make that demand? Isn't competition free now ?"

INDIVIDUALIST: "No. But one of the three factors in production is free. Laborers are free to compete among themselves, and so are capitalists to a certain extent. But between laborers and capitalists there is no competition whatever, because through governmental privilege granted to capital, whence the volume of the currency and the rate of interest is regulated, the owners of it are enabled to keep the laborers dependent on them for employment, so making the condition of wage-subjection perpetual. So long as one man, or class of men, are able to prevent others from working for themselves because they cannot obtain the means of production or capitalize their own products, so long those others are not free to compete freely with those to whom privilege gives the means. For instance, can you see any competition between the farmer and his hired man? Don't you think he would prefer to work for himself? Why does the farmer employ him? Is it not to make some profit from his labor? And does the hired man give him that profit out of pure good nature? Would he not rather have the full product of his labor at his own disposal?"

COMMUNIST: "And what of that? What does that prove?"

INDIVIDUALIST: "I am coming to that directly. Now, does this relation between the farmer and his man in any way resemble a cooperative affair between equals, free to compete, but choosing to work together for mutual benefit? You know it does not. Can't you see that since the hired man does not willingly resign a large share of his product to his employer (and it is out of human nature to say he does), there must be something which forces him to do it? Can't you see that the necessity of an employer is forced upon him by his lack of ability to command the means of production? He cannot employ himself, therefore he must sell his labor at a disadvantage to him who controls the land and capital. Hence he is not free to compete with his employer any more than a prisoner is free to compete with his jailer for fresh air.

COMMUNIST: "Well, I admit that much. Certainly the employee cannot compete with his employer."

INDIVIDUALIST: "Then you admit that there is not free competition in the present state of society. In other words, you admit that the laboring class are not free to compete with the holders of capital, because they have not, and cannot get, the means of production. Now for your 'what of that?' It follows that if they had access to land and opportunity to capitalize the product of their labor they would either employ themselves, or, if employed by others, their wages, or remuneration, would rise to the full product of their toil, since no one would work for another for less than he could obtain by working for himself."

COMMUNIST: "But your object is identical with that of Communism! Why all this to convince me that the means of production must be taken from the hands of the few and given to all? Communists believe that; it is precisely what we are fighting for."

INDIVIDUALIST: "You misunderstand me if you think we wish to take from or give to any one. We have no scheme for regulating distribution. We substitute nothing, make no plans. We trust to the unfailing balance of supply and demand. We say that with equal opportunity to produce, the division of product will necessarily approach equitable distribution, but we have no method of 'enacting' such equalization."

COMMUNIST: "But will not some be strong and skillful, others weak and unskillful? Will not one-deprive the other because he is more shrewd?"

INDIVIDUALIST: "Impossible! Have I not just shown you that the reason one man controls another's manner of living is because he controls the opportunities to produce? He does this through a special governmental privilege. Now, if this privilege is abolished, land becomes free, and if there is the ability to capitalize products removing interest, even if one man is stronger or shrewder than another, he nevertheless can make no profit from that other's labor, because he cannot stop him from employing himself. The cause of subjection is then removed."

COMMUNIST: "YOU call that equality! That one man shall have more than others simply because he is stronger or smarter? Your system is no better than the present. What are we struggling against but that very inequality in people's possessions?"

INDIVIDUALIST: "But what is equality? Does equality mean that I shall enjoy what you have produced? By no means. Equality simply means the freedom of every individual to develop all his being, without hindrance from another, be he stronger or weaker."

COMMUNIST: "What! You will have the weak person suffer because he is weak? He may need as much, or more, than a strong one, but if he is not able to produce it what becomes of his equality?"

INDIVIDUALIST: "I have nothing against your dividing your product with the weaker man if you desire to do so."

COMMUNIST: "There you are with charity again. Communism wants no charity."

INDIVIDUALIST: I have often marveled on the singularity of Communistic mathematics. My act you call charity, our act is not charity. If one person does a kind act you stigmatize it; if one plus one, summed up and called a commune, does the same thing, you laud it. By some species of alchemy akin to the transmutation of metals, the arsenic of charity becomes the gold of justice! Strange calculation! Can you not see that you are running from a bugaboo again? You change the name, but the character of an action is not altered by the number of people participating in it."

COMMUNIST: "But it is not the same action. For me to assist you out of pity is the charity of superior possession to the inferior. But to base society upon the principle: 'From each according to his capacity, and to each according to his needs' is not charity in any sense."

INDIVIDUALIST: "That is a finer discrimination than logic can find any basis for. But suppose that, for the present, we drop the discussion of charity, which is really a minor point, as a further discussion will show."

COMMUNIST: "But I say it is very important. See! Here are two workmen. One can make five pair of shoes a day; the other, perhaps, not more than three. According to you, the less rapid workmen will be deprived of the enjoyments of life, or at any rate will not be able to get as much as the other, because of a natural inability, a thing not his fault, to produce as much as his competitor."

INDIVIDUALIST: "It is true that under our present conditions, there are such differences in productive power. But these, to a large extent, would be annihilated by the development of machinery and the ability to use it in the absence of privilege. Today the majority of trade-people are working at uncongenial occupations. Why? Because they have neither the chance for finding out for what they are adapted, nor the opportunity of devoting themselves to it if they had. They would starve to death while searching; or, finding it, would only bear the disappointment of being kept outside the ranks of an already overcrowded pathway of life. Trades are, by force of circumstances, what formerly they were by law, matters of inheritance. I am a tailor because by father was a tailor, and it was easier for him to introduce me to that mode of making a living than any other, although I have no special adaptation for it. But postulating equal chances, that is free access and non-interest bearing capital, when a man finds himself unable to make shoes as well or as rapidly as his co-worker, he would speedily seek a more congenial occupation."

COMMUNIST: "And he will be traveling from one trade to another like a tramp after lodgings!"

INDIVIDUALIST: "Oh no; his lodgings will be secure! When you admitted that competition is not now free, did I not say to you that when it becomes so, one of two things must happen: either the laborer will employ himself, or the contractor must pay him the full value of his product. The result would be increased demand for labor. Able to employ himself, the producer will get the full measure of his production, whether working independently, by contract, or co-operatively, since the competition of opportunities, if I may so present it, would destroy the possibility of profits. With the reward of labor raised to its entire result, a higher standard of living will necessarily follow; people will want more in proportion to their intellectual development; with the gratification of desires come new wants, all of which guarantees constant

labor-demand. Therefore, even your trades-tramp will be sure of his existence.

“But you must consider further that the business of changing trades is no longer the difficult affair it was formerly. Years ago, a mechanic, or laborer, was expected to serve from four to seven years’ apprenticeship. No one was a thorough workman until he knew all the various departments of his trade. Today the whole system of production is revolutionized. Men become specialists. A shoemaker, for instance, spends his days in sewing one particular seam. The result is great rapidity and proficiency in a comparatively short space of time. No great amount of strength or skill is required; the machine furnishes both. Now, you will readily see that, even supposing an individual changes his vocation half a dozen times, he will not travel very long before he finds that to which he is adapted, and in which he can successfully compete with others.”

COMMUNIST: “But admitting this, don’t you believe there will always be some who can produce more than their brothers? What is to prevent their obtaining advantages over the less fortunate?”

INDIVIDUALIST: “Certainly I do believe there are such differences in ability, but that they will lead to the iniquity you fear I deny. Suppose A does produce more than B, does he in anyway injure the latter so long as he does not prevent B from applying his own labor to exploit nature, with equal facilities as himself, either by self-employment or by contract with others?”

COMMUNIST: “Is that what you call right? Will that produce mutual fellowship among human beings? When I see that you are enjoying things which I cannot hope to get, what think you will be my feelings toward you? Shall I not envy and hate you, as the poor do the rich today.”

INDIVIDUALIST: “Why, will you hate a man because he has finer eyes or better health than you? Do you want to demolish a person’s manuscript because he excels you in penmanship? Would you cut the extra length from Samson’s hair, and divide it around equally among all short-haired people? Will you share a slice from the poet’s genius and put it in the common storehouse so everybody can go and take some? If there happened to be a handsome woman in your neighborhood who devotes her smiles to your brother, shall you get angry and insist that they be ‘distributed according to the needs’ of the Commune? The differences in natural ability are not, in freedom, great enough to injure any one or disturb the social equilibrium. No one man can produce more than three others; and even granting that much, you can see that it would never create the chasm which lies between Vanderbilt and the switchman on his tracks.”

COMMUNIST: “But in establishing equal justice, Communism would prevent even the possibility of injustice.”

INDIVIDUALIST: “Is it justice to take from talent to reward incompetency? Is it justice to virtually say that the tool is not to the toiler, nor the product to the producer, but to others? Is it justice to rob toil of incentive? The justice you seek lies not in such injustice, where material equality could only be attained at the dead level of mediocrity. As freedom of contract enlarges, the nobler sentiments and sympathies invariably widen. With freedom of access to land and to capital, no glaring inequality in distribution could result. No workman rises far above or sinks much below the average day’s labor. Nothing but the power to enslave through controlling opportunity to utilize labor force could ever create such wide differences as we now witness.”

COMMUNIST: “Then you hold that your system will practically result in the same equality Communism demands. Yet, granting that, it will take a hundred years, or a thousand, perhaps, to bring it about. Meanwhile people are starving. Communism doesn’t propose to wait. It

proposes to adjust things here and now; to arrange matters more equitably while we are here to see it, and not wait till the sweet impossible sometime that our great, great grand children may see the dawn of. Why can't you join in with us and help us to do something?"

INDIVIDUALIST: "Yea, we hold that comparative equality will obtain, but pre-arrangement, institution, 'direction' can never bring the desired result — free society. Waving the point that any arrangement is a blow at progress, it really is an impossible thing to do. Thoughts, like things, grow. You cannot jump from the germ to perfect tree in a moment. No system of society can be instituted today which will apply to the demands of the future; that, under freedom will adjust itself. This is the essential difference between Communism and cooperation. The one fixes, adjusts, arranges things, and tends to the rigidity which characterizes the cast off shells of past societies; the other trusts to the unfailing survival of the fittest, and the broadening of human sympathies with freedom; the surety that that which is in the line of progress tending toward the industrial ideal, will, in a free field, obtain by force of its superior attraction. Now, you must admit, either that there will be under freedom, different social arrangements in different societies, some Communistic, others quite the reverse, and that competition will necessarily rise between them, leaving to results to determine which is the best, or you must crush competition, institute Communism, deny freedom, and fly in the face of progress. What the world needs, my friend, is not new methods of instituting things, but abolition of restrictions upon opportunity."

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<https://www.panarchy.org/voltairine/dialogue.html>

Voltairine de Cleyre presents the position of the individualist anarchist and clarifies the fact that selfishness and carelessness are not part and parcel of that position contrary to what many, anarchists or not, think.

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