

Individualism Reconsidered

Individualist Anarchism is usually overlooked or misrepresented among Communist Anarchists. This classic pamphlet combines a primer on the individualist tradition and an extensive bibliography.



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Individualism Reconsidered

by

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Introduction

The purpose of this pamphlet is to give a brief introduction to individualist anarchist ideas. Having read a wide variety of both american and international anarchist publications for over ten years, and having participated in continental anarchist gatherings, we have been struck by the overwhelmingly collectivist outlook of most anarchists, as well as the widespread hostility towards or lack of knowledge about the individualist tradition in anarchist thought and practice. Because of this present trend in the anarchist movement, we felt it was important to come out with a defense of individualism.

Throughout the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, the individualists made up a major part of the anarchist movement in the united states. There were individualist communities like New Harmony and Modern Times organized by Josiah Warren and his fellow-thinkers, and publications like Liberty, an individualist newspaper published by Benjamin Tucker, were widely read throughout the united states. Additionally, most of the prominent figures in the sex radical movement, such as Lillian and Moses Harman and Angela and Ezra Heywood, were individualist anarchists.

Collectivist anarchists of this period were familiar with the individualist tradition and considered it a valid part of the anarchist movement. Alexander Berkman briefly discussed individualism in his *What is Communist Anarchism?*, and, although rejecting it as impractical and erroneous, considered individualism a legitimate branch of anarchist thought. Errico Malatesta, in *Property*, while calling himself a communist, discussed the possibility of individualist economic arrangements in an anarchist society and envisioned a world where differing economic forms would coexist and cooperate. Another communist anarchist, Emma Goldman, differed with the individualists about economics and tactics, but associated and/or worked with a number of individualist

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anarchists. In her writings, especially *The Individual, Society, and the State and Minorities and Majorities*, Goldman frequently emphasized the importance of individuality and individual freedom. Additionally, the collectivist Rudolf Rocker gave an extensive, positive overview of the american individualist anarchist tradition in his book, *Pioneers of American Freedom*.

Today, however, there is almost no mention of individualism, individuality, or individual freedom in most of the anarchist press, except in the context of, and subordinate to, the needs and desires of a larger social collective. For instance, in an article called "What is Anarchism?" published in the magazine *What's Left in Boston* in 1989, the writer devotes only one half of one sentence to the ideas of individualist anarchists, stating simply that "Individualist anarchists place primary importance on the freedom of the individual," a rather obvious point. (Later in the same article, however, she writes three paragraphs about the influence of non-anarchist "currents" within the modern movement such as feminism, unconventional sexuality, spirituality, and punk.) Her only response to the concerns of individualists is that, "In an ideal anarchist society, the needs of the community as a whole can be met in a just manner without unduly impinging on the individual's free will;" there is no discussion of the potential conflicts in such a community. Like the author of the above article, most anarchists speak primarily of the liberation of peoples, classes, nations, races, sexes, or other "oppressed groups," just as the statist left does. In fact, most anarchists seem to differ from statist socialists only in their rejection of the state, while sharing their view that the "community" or group should take precedence over the individual. Their vision of communist anarchism or libertarian socialism leaves little room for individual freedom and difference. They seem to feel that the economic and social equality they expect to achieve in their collectivist social system will eliminate conflicts and differences between people, who then will all wish to cooperate and live harmoniously with everyone else.

Anyone who rejects the collectivist utopia is seen as anti-social, right-wing, or not a "real" anarchist, and is generally not taken seriously by other anarchists. Many anarchist papers will publicize books and newspapers published by statist while

ignoring individualist publications such as those of the BAD Brigade. Additionally some anarchists are more willing to sponsor lectures by statist than by individualist anarchists. For example, here in Boston, some members of the anarchist Black Rose group were opposed to having an individualist anarchist speak as part of their lecture series, although they have in the past sponsored many non-anarchist speakers, including Stephen Bronner, author of a biography of Rosa Luxemburg, who explicitly ridiculed anarchist ideas during his speaking engagement. Even though all of the writings of the BAD Brigade have been explicitly anarchist, apparently our individualist outlook makes us too heretical for most other anarchists, who would rather associate with and promote other leftists.

With this pamphlet, we intend to initiate a critique of the collectivist bias of most anarchists, and hope to rekindle an awareness of and interest in issues of individuality and individual freedom within the anarchist movement. Hopefully a renewed discussion of these issues will promote a more open atmosphere in the american and international anarchist movements.

What is individualism?

There are a number of misconceptions about individualists widespread in the anarchist movement which hinder discussion of the ideas of individual freedom. They are seen by many collectivist anarchists as greedy capitalists who simply wish to get the government off their backs so they can more easily rob the helpless workers. Additionally, they are often viewed as uncaring about the problems of anyone other than themselves, and totally opposed to cooperation between people. These are myths which need to be dispelled before any worthwhile dialogue can take place between the collectivists and the individualists.

Individualists feel that the way to maximize human freedom and happiness is by abolishing not just the state, but all other involuntary relationships and organizations as well. Although I reject mandatory participation in any organization or society, I am not opposed to cooperation between free individuals to better

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in and of her/himself, and that disregard of the views or welfare of an individual for the sake of the group is never justified. While voluntary organizations should be free to conduct their business as they see fit, those that lose sight of the views of their individual members will become hierarchical and authoritarian, as virtually all organizations, anarchist or not, have always been.

Conclusion

I have shown above that individualist anarchists like myself differ from collectivist anarchists in that we view the individual person as the most important part of human society. We feel that individuals should be free to engage in any voluntary activity they choose, with whomever they choose, whenever and wherever they choose, unless, by so doing, they violate the freedom of other non-coercive persons. People should be free to own the land and space they use and occupy and participate in whatever non-coercive economic enterprise they wish. Individualists also think, however, that people should be free to live in communist, syndicalist, capitalist, or any other kinds of communities they choose, as long as they do not coerce others into participating in these societies against their will. In short, individualists feel that a society in which non-invasive people are free to choose in all areas of their lives, unregulated by any state or community, will best serve the needs and desires of individual human beings.

These ideas are just as important for collectivist anarchists to consider and discuss as they are for individualists. Collectivists and individualists share one important and fundamental set of ideas, our critique of the state, and we can work together on our shared goal of abolishing government. However, in order for us to effectively cooperate in this project, collectivists need to take individualist ideas more seriously than they do at present. Hopefully this pamphlet will contribute to this process of re-examination and re-evaluation of these ideas.

satisfy their desires and needs. I oppose the welfare state and support private property, but encourage interested people to voluntarily help others in need of assistance. And, while I oppose any restrictions on voluntary economic activities, I am opposed to the theft of the labor of others, which is called profit. I feel that people's desires can be fulfilled, and a just society achieved, without the oversight of either the state or the community.

The individualist view of the person is quite different from that of the collectivist. The individualist views people as responsible agents who, even in present-day, unfree society, have to take at least partial responsibility for the situations in which they find themselves, and therefore are capable of changing their situation, at least in part. Through gradual and often small changes in the way people think and lead their lives today, and through a continual expansion in the number of people adopting a libertarian outlook, government can be abolished and the world changed to a free one.

Collectivists, on the other hand, often seem to view people as perpetual victims of an evil social system, which strips them of the ability to make choices, and therefore frees them of all responsibility for their lives and problems. This view of people leads to an elitist attitude towards people and their problems. Collectivists often end up in the unanarchic position of regarding people as ignorant and immature, and therefore in need of protection from themselves and others by continued regulation and laws. Rarely, for instance, do collectivists endorse decriminalization and deregulation of drugs as a solution to the violence and illness associated with the use of illegal pleasure drugs. In their view, apparently, it is only after the revolution (made by the enlightened collectivists) has been achieved, and the economic leveling of libertarian socialism has allowed other people to develop their reasoning faculty to an adequate level, that they should be allowed to make unsupervised decisions.

Because of their different outlook on people, individualists look at people's problems and their solutions in a vastly different way. The primary idea in individualist thought is that the individual person should be free to do whatever they wish with their body or property, provided it does not interfere with the equal

freedom of other non-invasive or non-coercive persons. Additionally, individualists support the freedom of people to engage in whatever activities they wish with other consenting persons in all spheres of human interaction. People should be free to choose any kind of economic, sexual, medical, or any other sort of relationship with any person who consents to it.

Along with this freedom, however, comes responsibility. Individualists recognize that a free society and a free life would be more risky in many ways than a controlling welfare state, and accept that as the price of freedom. Although an anarchist society would likely be a much less violent society, we would be without some of the safeguards of a mandatory political state. Getting rid of governmental and non-governmental regulation of individuals' activities will produce a society that is free, but also one in which there is no longer a coercively formed "safety net". In a free society, and, to a large extent, even now, people who wish freedom must be willing to accept the consequences of their actions. People should not be protected from themselves by coercive laws, but other persons should not be forced to come to the aid of people who have, through their own free action, inconvenienced themselves, harmed themselves, or put themselves at risk. If laws against the free use of drugs, both medicinal and recreational, were abolished, it is possible (although not likely) that more people would hurt themselves with drugs than is currently the case. However, this is no argument for retaining these laws. People who use these drugs must use them responsibly, or take the consequences. My freedom to medicate myself however I choose should not be abridged simply because I or someone else may use these drugs in ways of which others disapprove or which may be dangerous. But, on the other hand, I cannot hold the drug maker or drug seller responsible if I later regret the consequences of my decision. Similarly, women should be free either to have children, if they wish, or choose abortion or any form of contraception they desire to use to terminate or prevent a pregnancy. But, once someone has decided to have a child, they should not be able to coerce disinterested others into helping support that child by extorting money from them in the form of taxes for school or day care.

whatever specific format they adopt at a specific time, to enable them to enforce decisions they support, and suppress ideas with which they disagree. This is a problem inherent in any organization, but when the majority of members share a collectivist and groupist outlook the problem tends to become more serious, since in such organizations the "good of the group" can always be invoked as a justification for the suppression or dismissal of minority points of view.

I had an instructive encounter with the workings of a collectivist anarchist group during the planning meeting for Haymarket '86 in November, 1985. At this meeting, a controversy developed about whether representatives of ShiMo Underground should be allowed to participate in the planning for the conference, since they were not anarchists and worked with leninists as well as anarchists. Most of those present were strongly opposed to ShiMo's participation, fearing that they would steer the conference in unanarchic ways (note that there were only two of them and about 40 anarchists present), or even that they would "steal our ideas". They seemed to feel that they needed to "protect" the conference from non-anarchist ideas. I felt that the ShiMo people should be allowed to stay since I am not afraid of debate, feel it is important to discuss differences of opinion, and think it would be great if others "stole" or adopted anarchist ideas. So, when it came time for a decision, I blocked consensus, which was the process agreed on to make a decision. Since they didn't get their way, the collectivists decided that we should make the decision by majority vote, and, of course, ShiMo was prevented from participating in the decision-making process. I have no objection to a group deciding who can and cannot join it. I do, however, object to manipulating group process to achieve one's own ends, while claiming to be operating in a principled and open fashion.

This view, that it is alright to use unprincipled means to achieve one's desired ends, is apparently shared by many collectivist anarchists. Individualists feel that means are as important as ends, or, as the Voluntaryists (an individualist anarchist organization) state in the masthead of their magazine, *The Voluntaryist*, "If one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself." I feel that each non-coercive individual is important

women. While we need to oppose ideas and actions based on sexist thinking, we also need to look at people as individuals to better understand their actions and problems. Substituting one sexist ideology for another is not the way to freer relations and understanding between women and men.

This support for nationalism and feminism, and groupism in general, is based on a view of individuals and groups that differs greatly from the individualist perspective. Collectivists feel that groups have rights that supersede the freedoms of individuals who disagree with them. Individualists, on the other hand feel that groups of individuals should have no more rights or freedoms than the individuals themselves do. An individual should not be free to kill another, steal from another, enslave another, or rule another. Therefore, a group of individuals, whether the state, the collective, or the community, should not be free to execute (kill) others, tax (steal from) others, draft (enslave) others, or "carry out the people's will" on (rule) others. Only the individual should be free to decide what they wish to do with their life and property. As long as the individual is non-coercive, their activities should be no business of the "community."

Decision-making in collectivist groups

Besides supporting groupist ideologies and the anti-individualist activities of other groupist organizations and institutions, the collectivist anarchists themselves tend to be intolerant of individual differences in their own organizations. Obviously, organizations, which individualists are not opposed to, need to be able to make decisions. Consensus, voting, and other forms of group decision-making are all useful at certain times and in certain situations (although I feel consensus, especially in larger groups, is often used as a way either for the majority to wear down the minority to eventually get its way without the formality of a vote, or for a minority to obstruct the decision-making process and paralyze the group). My experience with the collectivists, however, mainly around the north american anarchist gatherings is that they are more than willing to manipulate group decision-making,

Because individualists emphasize freedom over all other values, they are also more willing to tolerate some degree of inequality between people than are collectivists. A voluntary society would offer all people essentially unlimited opportunities to make a life for themselves in any way they wish, but, because of differences between people and their desires, it is likely that some people would end up with more possessions than others, healthier than others, or happier than others. However, in the absence of a state which enforces the privileges of monopolies through restrictions on access to credit and entry into the market place, the wide discrepancies in wealth, and the consequent extreme differences in standards of living, in contemporary society would not exist. People need or want different things, and there is no reason to think that absolute economic equality is necessary for a just society.

What would an individualist society look like?

There are all sorts of people who label themselves individualist anarchists and we often disagree among ourselves both about what to do now, and what the future might look like. For instance, the capitalist anarchists, like Wendy McElroy, Sam Konkin, Murray Rothbard, David Friedman, and the Voluntaryists, are individualists. However, there are other individualists, like myself and the individualists of the past, such as Benjamin Tucker, Josiah Warren, and John Henry Mackay, who reject capitalism as much as they reject communism. An anarchist society, based on voluntary agreement between autonomous individuals, would probably be a mix of communities and individuals who follow different economic systems, some communist, some capitalist, some individualist or mutualist. These societies could exist side by side in peace as long as none of the various societies or individuals interfered with those who chose to live differently from themselves. (p.m., in the book, *bolo'bolo*, presents one model of how a world of such diverse communities and individuals might function.) I, for instance, would prefer to live in an individualist society, but respect the freedom of others to participate in capitalist or communist economic arrangements, providing, of course, that

participation in all of these societies is strictly voluntary.

Without a state there would be no monopoly on credit or money. Any group of persons could come together and form a mutual bank, as described in the writings of William B Greene and P-J Proudhon (whose writings were first translated into English by the individualist Benjamin Tucker). The members of such a bank could acquire credit by mortgaging their property or labor to the bank and receiving bills of exchange in return, which other bank members would agree to honor. Competition in the unregulated banking business would drive interest rates down to the level sufficient to cover the actual operating expenses of the bank, eliminating the unearned profit in interest charges. With this increase in the availability of credit, now accessible to virtually everyone, people would be able to start their own businesses or launch cooperative projects with others and vastly expand their range of choices in types of work and business. Because of this widespread competition in the market place, those who choose to continue to sell their labor to others would be able to demand wages that reflected the full value of their labor, since the easy availability of credit and, therefore, other economic options, would free them to settle for nothing less. This would eliminate profit.

This expansion in economic freedom would lead to a huge increase in the numbers and kinds of economic enterprises and a consequent increase in the numbers and kinds of products and services available in the market place. People could make, do, buy, or trade whatever they like as long as they could find a buyer, seller, or trader who wished to deal with them. The competition produced by free access to the market place would result in low prices and good quality. However, the lack of a regulatory state that licenses and "approves" products, businesses, services, and people would mean that the individual would have to take responsibility for finding out about the quality or reliability of the products or services they wish to purchase, and become more knowledgeable about other people and businesses in order to protect their interests in the market place. Individual enterprises or organizations like the Consumers Union would likely arise to investigate businesses, products, and services and provide the information they have gathered to consumers, better enabling them

we are speaking of the self determination of persons, not peoples: the freedom of individuals to make all the decisions in their lives. The "right of nations (or peoples) to self-determination" invariably conflicts with this goal.

Here in the united states, collectivist anarchists also tend to support feminism, another groupist ideology. As with their support of nationalists, the collectivists make the mistake of taking feminists as representative of all women, and are frequently willing to support or excuse sexist attitudes and behavior on the part of feminists, while intolerant of sexism exhibited by men. They support exclusivist women-only "space", as was set up during the San Francisco anarchist conference, and women-only conferences like the Obnoxious Wimmin's Network gathering before the San Francisco conference; frequently spell woman and women in strange ways, like womyn and wimmin, apparently to distance themselves from even the words man and men, as in the pages of Love and Rage, Reality Now, and the San Francisco conference newsletter; and are unwilling to criticize sexist writings by feminists, like the writer in Mayday #6 who says she "learned that in this period of my life I cannot work politically with men." (With this statement she implies all men are a problem, just because she worked with some men who were assholes. Imagine the reaction in the anarchist press if she said something similar about black people.) Another writer, in the Mayday of October, 1989, in addition to many other sexist comments about men, stated that "wimmin don't lie about sexism." (Contrary to feminist orthodoxy, women are no less likely to lie than men.)

Women and men often have trouble working together. Some men demonstrate sexist attitudes and behavior towards women, including at anarchist events and in anarchist writings. Some women do not assert themselves, especially around men. But there are many people of both sexes who dominate others, and many more, again of both sexes, who allow themselves to be dominated. There are also many women and men who work well together and respect other people without regard to sex, preferring cooperation to either domination or submission. Describing all conflicts between men and women as caused by sexism is both inaccurate and anti-individualist. Not all men behave alike, and neither do all

Mondale). Additionally, I was criticized in *Instead of a Magazine* #34 for an article I wrote criticizing the sandinistas, who refused to decriminalize abortion, attacked indian people on nicaragua's Atlantic coast, and instituted a military draft. This collectivist anarchist support for nationalism even led some members of the Sabotage collective in New York to place a poster of Nelson Mandela in the window of their bookstore and post a sign containing a quote from Fidel Castro outside. The problem is that such nationalist groups and leaders no more represent the interests of individual members of these "nations" than the united states government represents the interests of individual united states residents. However, leftists in the united states, including many anarchists, tend to be fearful of being labeled pro-imperialist or racist if they don't support the "legitimate aspirations" of the various nationalist groups. These groups have always replaced the governments they oppose with other hateful states that continue to abuse some and favor others and never produce the equitable society that the collectivists envision. Supporters of these nationalists thus often end up in a position of de facto support for authoritarian practices which they would oppose if engaged in by the united states government or its allies. They don't seem to see that it is racist to apologize for latin american (and other) governments that engage in practices that the collectivists would never accept if enacted here in the united states.

An individualist outlook produces a much different position. While opposing united states (and other imperialist) interventions in the lives of people in other countries, I am equally opposed to intervention in their lives by homegrown governments of whatever political description. Opposition to imperialism does not require support for authoritarian anti-imperialists. Just as I criticize the various anti-freedom and anti-individualist activities of the united states government here and abroad, I am equally opposed to similar activities on the part of other governments (and individuals). There is no more justification for the murder of indian people, the criminalization of abortion, a military draft, and restrictions on the market place in nicaragua than there is in the united states. We must be consistent in our critique of the state, wherever it exists. When individualists support self-determination,

to make informed choices.

People would own only the land they use and occupy. There would be no landlords and no rent. There would also be no zoning regulations which interfere with housing, agriculture, and other economic and social activities. If people were able to own their residences and homestead and build where and what they chose, their freedom to live as they please would increase. There would be no shortage of housing and no involuntary homelessness.

In addition to total economic freedom, individualists favor complete freedom in all other areas of life: freedom to say, publish, paint, photograph, display, or broadcast whatever one wishes, with no regulation of the press or airwaves, and no copyright; freedom to have sex with or love anyone who consents to the interaction, even if money or gifts are exchanged as part of the agreement, with no legal age of consent; freedom to medicate oneself, whether for therapeutic or recreational ends, with no regulation of drug manufacture or sales; freedom to bear or not bear children, including the freedom to abort or not abort an unwanted fetus; freedom to terminate one's life when and how one chooses; freedom to arm oneself with whatever weapons one wishes, without being subject to the regulation or oversight of others; freedom to believe in anything one wishes, no matter how foolish, whether god/dess, gaia, or the cosmic muffin; freedom to live where one chooses, anywhere in the world, as long as there is unoccupied, unused land or space in or on which to live; freedom from compulsory education; freedom from cops, courts, taxes, prisons and jails, and all other manifestations of government. Anything voluntary is acceptable. Anything coercive or invasive is unacceptable and to be resisted by any means the individual chooses.

This view of individualist society was shared by many american and a few european anarchists of the past, but is held by a much smaller number of contemporary anarchists. However, those of us who believe in these ideas feel that an individualist society would serve most people better than the alternatives offered by the communist anarchists and libertarian socialists.

Some problems with collectivism: an individualist critique

The most serious problem with the collectivist view of people and the world is what I call "groupism", the idea that categories of people are more important than, and fully represent the needs and aspirations of, individual members of these categories. The collectivist anarchist press, like most of the rest of the leftist press, is filled with references to "women's issues", "communities/people of color", "the working class", "the lesbian and gay community", "people with AIDS (PWAs)", etc. (See the political statement published in every issue of Love and Rage for a perfect example of this tendency among collectivists to ghettoize people into such groups.) The assumption is made that self-proclaimed representatives of these supposed communities or groups are somehow able to speak for all the individual members of these huge groups of people. I have frequently heard people start their presentations at conferences and other events with the formulation, "Speaking as a woman (or black person, or gay man, or lesbian, etc)..." and then go on to speak as if they are representative of all other persons who share the description in question. And a writer in Mayday #6 stated that "people of color have their own struggle; it may not be ours." No recognition is given to the reality that these alleged communities and groups are made up of vastly different individuals with a broad range of interests and viewpoints.

One cannot speak meaningfully about the interests or ideas of black people or women or homosexuals or workers, because the different individuals described by these labels are often very unlike most members of their "group", just as they are frequently very much like many persons who are of a different class, sex, color, or sexual proclivity. Much to the dismay of leftists, anarchist and otherwise, there are large numbers of anti-abortion women, anti-union workers, anti-sandinista nicaraguans, and anti-ANC black south africans. Collectivist anarchists who make assumptions about people based on their color or sex are just as racist and sexist as non-anarchists who also make assumptions about people based on these criteria; they simply make different, but equally invalid,

assumptions.

These people also judge people's activities differently based on what "community" a person is a part of. For instance, in Reality Now #8, animal liberationists, who otherwise condemn killing animals for fur, defended american indian people who are engaged in fur trapping. According to these people, the fact that indian people are "oppressed" makes it acceptable for them to engage in conduct that non-indian americans would be criticized for. Similarly, collectivist anarchists defended the hierarchical and authoritarian social structure of dine/navajo people at Big Mountain in Open Road #20, encouraging non-indian people to "'tak[e] direction' from the traditional Native American leadership". Defending authority based on the color of those who wield it is simply racist.

The groupist outlook also leads many collectivists to assign collective blame to all members of a group when some members do something of which they disapprove. This was exemplified many times during the San Francisco anarchist conference in 1989. There, in workshop after workshop, and at the open mike, "men" were constantly criticized for the sexist behavior of some men. And, at one session at the open mike, heterosexualists in general were blamed for the obnoxious anti-homosexual behavior of a few conference participants. The daily conference bulletin reported that during this speakout about "homophobia" the speakers "insisted that there will continue to be a gay anarchist movement, there is no ensuring that there would be a straight anarchist movement if behavior did not change." Blaming all men or all heterosexualists for the misdeeds of some men or some heterosexualists, besides being incorrect, serves as a bully tactic to stifle real discussion about the issues of sexism and heterosexism by intimidation.

Groupism frequently leads collectivist anarchists to support and/or apologize for some very authoritarian movements and institutions. For instance, many collectivist anarchists support the right of nations to self-determination, and tend to be sympathetic to authoritarian socialist and nationalist governments that proclaim the same principle, as in the case of the author of the front-page article published in Emancipation #60 defending the sandinistas (which also includes a statement that the author voted for