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December 26, 2013



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Written for the magazine "Osvobohkdyeneyi Leechonostee" ("The Liberation of the Individual") (1992) Author email: <cube@glas.apc.org>
<http://flag.blackened.net/liberty/indvsind.txt>

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The notion of individualism has varying connotations in Russian and in American perceptions. An individualist can be understood as someone who does not understand the need to submit to the collective will, or an unabashed hedonist, or simply a non-conformist. The most common notion of individualism seems to be that of a philosophy of unrestricted personal freedom, regardless of consequence. This philosophy, although a reality, should not be confused with anarchistic individualism; any understanding as such is really a perversion of its philosophy which holds as sacrosanct the fundamental notion of the worth of each individual.

This misunderstanding of both the terms anarchist and individualist runs rampant and is evident for example in the categorization of Max Stirner, perhaps the greatest individualist anarchist thinker, as a spiritual father of the far right; his classic book “The Ego and Its Own” has been published in America and abroad as a part in series on the far right, including fascism. However far from expounding a philosophy of individualism at all costs, Stirner pointed out that an individual’s actions should not infringe upon others; such acts would infringe upon the individual rights of others. It is an important concept in individualist philosophy that the rights of the individual are universal.

With the aforementioned as our philosophical premise we can start an inquiry as to the nature of individualist behaviour and what is not.

First and foremost, a system of economic privilege is anti-individualist. Economic privilege rests on different relations of power. This can mean a disparagement in access to capital or it can be monopolization and protectionism. In nearly every case, economic privilege relies on the exploitation of others. Strong centralized power structures can function to ensure the privilege of an elite. Economic privilege is anti-individualist, not only in the sense that privilege must be, by its very meaning, exclusive, non-universal but also due to the fact that it denies others through mechanisms of protectionism (most commonly the law) and that it most always rests on the nonwilling exploitation of others.

Thus in far right capitalist ideology, the relation between owner and worker is rationalized. Every owner believes they have created a job for their worker and that, if that worker feels exploited, they are free to get another job or to create their own business. The capitalist is working from a point of advantage as the system of wage labour is in place and

few even question their relation to the creation of wealth. The system does not freely allow for people to work outside it, or to even freely work independently inside it as it uses control of the means of exchange (money) and protectionism of capital to prevent people from creating an economy that would cut into its profit margins. The worker is not free — not free to take her or his share of the profits (as Americans say, property is 9/10 of the law), nor are they free to withhold their labour as they would be denied access to the means of exchange. Most assertions of individual rights would result in reprisals. Fair relations cannot exist in such a rigged framework; in individualist philosophy, the individual must be able to demand an end to infringement without fear of reprisal.

The same goes for any situation where ownership is controlled centrally, bureaucratically and is protected by a political system with the power of conducting reprisal, most often through law and imprisonment, but also through other means of denial. (a structure of privilege thus becomes very convenient to keep people in order.)

It can also be argued that a system of representative government, and subsequently, a system of representative law is also anti-individualist. While one could argue that not everybody wants to participate in decision making processes and that therefore, representation is necessary, one can also see clear examples of the “representatives” of the people making decisions that do not represent their desires and in fact encroach on their civil liberties. There is no system existing where the individual can legally refuse a decision not representing their wishes once it has been encoded into law. Thus a young Russian man may be lucky enough to find ways out of military service — but maybe not. The ethical considerations of the individual are inconsequential. Representatives have also been known to make laws which simply are extensions of their moral fetishes; such are America’s anti-sodomy and anti-adultery laws, which, though rarely enforced, exist on the books. Putting such abuses aside, representative government can be a vehicle for the extreme repression of the individual. Laws that protect the individual (i.e. against murder) are relatively few. Most laws protect a non-individual entity: government, party, structure, church, property.

Representative government cannot be changed by an individual’s absorption into it; the structures remain the same. Decision making must be open to those whose life the decisions effect if they so choose.

In social life too individualist philosophy cannot be seen as mere hedonism at anybody’s expense. The idea (unfortunately too often people’s misconception of anarchy) that one can indiscriminately go around killing, raping and doing as they please does not stem from an anarcho-individualist philosophy. “Your right to swing the frying pan stops where my face starts,” is a little understanding we have. If you expect others to respect your rights, you must naturally, logically extend this respect to others. Doing what you want, when it hurts others, is not a celebration of individual rights, but of your own unlimited rights, which, if they infringe seriously on others, must rest in some power relation.

Social systems of reprisal act to repress the individual. Most often these systems are based in a moralism of intolerance (for example like that currently preached by many churches) rather than an ethic of respect for diversity. The social rights of homosexuals, for example, are often infringed upon because of some elusive structure of moral repression whereas their relations, being consensual, have no element of coercion and therefore infringement in them. An individualist ethic must be tolerant of difference, both natural and chosen. If somebody wants to tattoo their face, walk around naked, etc., this must be respected as it has no bearing on your decisions, for example, to walk around clothed. Prejudice of all sorts, be it racism, sexism, homophobia, national chauvinism, has no place in an anarcho-individualist philosophy as it sees people as members of groups, not as individuals.

Individualist philosophy, therefore, is one of the highest respect for the individual, not an infantile disorder of the ego, not a lofty rationalization for carrying out actions which, more likely than not, are not product of true desires but of forces outside the individual. It does not preclude forms of human community and cooperation. On the contrary, an individualist ethic can include the highest forms of (voluntary) community and cooperation (the anarchist idea of free association). It is an idea of respect, not disrespect — of the respect of each individual’s desire for self-realisation, unimpeded, sans power structures and factors of social interference, and of natural desire, whatever that might encompass.