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May 21, 2012



Le Rétif

Egoism

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January 1913

First published: in "Les Réfractaires," No 2-3, January 1913;

Source: *LeRétif, articles parus dans "l'anarchie."* Textes réunis et présentés par Yves Pagés. Paris, Monnier, 1989;

Translated: by Mitchell Abidor for marxists.org;

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It constitutes the basis of every animal mentality. Being necessary, it is legitimate. “Legitimate” — such picturesque language. In truth, our language is poorly adapted to reality. I mean to say that, primordial and indisputable, it is beyond our good and evil; it *is*. We glimpse it in various forms that can be reduced to two essential forms, and this has allowed us to imagine a conflict between altruism and egoism: egoism of the weak, altruism of the strong.

The weak man is greedy, self-interested, narrow spirited. What is a weak man? A being poor in strength. Can the poor man give? Offer himself the luxury of being generous, spendthrift, prodigal? No. He watches over his every penny, he watches out for every occasion to increase his tiny horde. He is — and he is doubtless right, retreating constantly into himself and taking advantage of all he can in order to survive — at antipodes from altruism.

The altruist? It is he who gives of himself, exerts himself, is prodigal with himself, which shows that he has the means of being so. Altruism is nothing but the logical form of the egoism of the strong. Goodness, generosity, devotion, abnegation are characteristics of strength and health. It’s an egoism of superior joys, for not only do they augment the vitality of he who feels them, but they also provoke in others an increase in vitality. The word “superior” here has no moral value: it is as superior in relation to life that we should understand this. Is there some merit in the strong being strong? We can only admit this when it’s a matter of an individual who has strengthened himself by his own will. And even then the strict determinist can protest. Let us leave him there with his casuistry.

Like the will, it seems that egoism is modified by heredity, education, and specific maladies. We should keep them in mind in order to explain these monstrosities: the individual who is strong and vulgarly egoist, and the other whom we admire: the weak, strengthened by his conviction, becoming altruistic — heroically.