

non serviam #5

A Critique of Communism and The Individualist Alternative

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(serial: 5)

But where did the common labourer fit into all this? Kropotkin makes the remarkable generalisation that "at no time has labour enjoyed such conditions of prosperity and such respect." [42] As proof he cites the "glorious donations" [43] the workers gave to the cathedrals. These, he says, "bear testimony of their relative well-being." [44] (Just as the Taj Mahal bears testimony of the relative well-being of the people of India, no doubt). "Many aspirations of our modern radicals were already realised in the Middle Ages [and] much of what is described now as Utopian was accepted then as a matter of fact." [45]

As for the material achievements of the Middle Ages, Kropotkin can't find a superlative super enough to describe them - but he tries:

"The very face of Europe had been changed. The land was dotted with rich cities, surrounded by immense thick walls [I wonder why?] which were embellished by towers and gates, each of them a work of art in itself. The cathedrals, conceived in a grand style and profusely decorated, lifted their bell-towers to the skies, displaying a purity of form and a boldness of imagination which we now vainly strive to attain....[He displays a bit of 'boldness of imagination' himself (to be quite charitable) when he goes on to say:] Over large tracts of land well-

being had taken the place of misery; learning had grown and spread. The methods of science had been elaborated; the basis of natural philosophy had been laid down; and the way had been paved for all the mechanical inventions of which our own times are so proud. Such were the magic [sic] changes accomplished in Europe in less than four hundred years." [46]

Just what were these "magic changes" of which Kropotkin is so proud? He lists about a dozen. [47] Among them are: printing (neglecting to inform us that the Gutenberg press was invented in the middle of the 15th century, sometime after the mediaeval cities "degenerated into centralised states"); steelmaking (neglecting to inform us that steelmaking had been mentioned in the works of Homer and was used continuously since that time); glassmaking (neglecting to inform us that the Encyclopaedia Britannica –to which he contributed numerous articles– devotes to the Middle Ages all of two sentences of a 27 page article on the history of glassmaking); the telescope (neglecting to inform us that it wasn't even invented until 1608); gunpowder and the compass (neglecting to inform us that the Chinese lay earlier claims to both of these inventions); algebra (neglecting to inform us that algebra was in common use in ancient Babylonia and that, although being

introduced to mediaeval Europe by the Arabs, no important contributions were made by Europeans until the Renaissance); the decimal system (neglecting to inform us that the Hindus invented the system about a thousand years before it gained any ground in Europe in the 17th century); calendar reform (neglecting to inform us that although Roger Bacon suggested such reform to the Pope in the 13th century, no action was taken until 300 years later under the reign of Pope Gregory XIII in 1582); chemistry (neglecting to inform us of an earlier work of his where he said chemistry was "entirely a product of our [19th] century." [48]) Indeed the only things he mentions as products of the Middle Ages which stand up under scrutiny are counterpoint and, paradoxically, the mechanical clock. To top it all off, he then has the gall to cite Galileo and Copernicus as being "direct descendents" of mediaeval science [49] - somehow managing to ignore the fact that Galileo spent the last eight years of his life under house arrest for supporting the Copernican theory, thanks to that grand mediaeval institution, the Inquisition.

You may be wondering why the people of the Middle Ages let such a Utopia slip through their fingers. Kropotkin cites foreign invasions –notably those of the Mongols, Turks, and Moors [50]– but makes it quite clear that the "greatest and most fatal error of most cities was to base their wealth upon commerce and industry." [51] So here we have it laid bare for all to see: Kropotkin's ideal community would not only return us to the dark ages, but would take away the one thing that could bring us back - commerce and industry.

Rudolf Rocker, the darling of the anarcho-syndicalists, similarly eulogises the Middle Ages. He, too, felt that mediaeval man led a "rich life" [52] which gave "wings to his spirit and prevent[ed] his mental

stagnation." [53] But unlike Kropotkin – who chalked up mediaeval solidarity to man's innate "nature"– Rocker (correctly) explains these "fraternal associations" by means of a most unanarchistic concept - Christianity:

"Mediaeval man felt himself to be bound up with a single, uniform culture, a member of a great community extending over all countries, in whose bosom all people found their place. It was the community of Christendom which included all the scattered units of the Christian world and spiritually unified them....The deeper the concept of Christianity took root in men, the easier they overcame all barriers between themselves and others, and the stronger lived in them the consciousness that all belonged to one great community and strove toward a common goal." [54]

So we see that the glue that held these idyllic mediaeval communities together was not Kropotkin's "mutual aid," but rather Christian mysticism. Rocker was perceptive enough to see this; Kropotkin apparently was not. But what both of these men failed to see was that mysticism is the necessary glue of ANY communist society. The mystical Garden of Eden is the ultimate goal of every church of the communist religion. Unfortunately, as every good Christian will tell you, the only way you can stay in the Garden of Eden is to abstain from the "tree of knowledge." Communists are apparently willing to pay this price. Individualists are not. It is communism's intention to carry religion to its ultimate absurdity: it would sacrifice man on the cross of altruism for the sake of - Man.

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I'd like to end my diatribe against communism by quoting another one. This

is what one prophetic Frenchman, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, had to say about communism eight years before the "Communist Manifesto" appeared like a spectre to haunt Europe - and like a good French wine, his words seem to have improved with age:

"Communism –or association in a simple form– is the necessary object and original aspiration of the social nature, the spontaneous movement by which it manifests and establishes itself. It is the first phase of human civilisation. In this state of society, – which the jurists have called 'negative communism'– man draws near to man, and shares with him the fruits of the field and the milk and flesh of animals. Little by little this communism – negative as long as man does not produce– tends to become positive and organic through the development of labour and industry. But it is then that the sovereignty of thought, and the terrible faculty of reasoning logically or illogically, teach man that, if equality is the sine qua non of society, communism is the first species of slavery....The disadvantages of communism are so obvious that its critics never have needed to employ much eloquence to thoroughly disgust men with it. The irreparability of the injustice which it causes, the violence which it does to attractions and repulsions, the yoke of iron which it fastens upon the will, the moral torture to which it subjects the conscience, the debilitating effect which it has upon society; and, to sum it all up, the pious and stupid uniformity which it enforces upon the free, active, reasoning, unsubmissive personality of man, have shocked common sense, and condemned communism by an irrevocable decree. The authorities and examples cited in its favour disprove it.

The communistic republic of Plato involved slavery; that of Lycurgus employed Helots, whose duty it was to produce for their masters, thus enabling the latter to devote themselves exclusively to athletic sports and to war, Even J. J. Rousseau –confounding communism and equality– has said somewhere that, without slavery, he did not think equality of conditions possible. The communities of the early Church did not last the first century out, and soon degenerated into monasteries....The greatest danger to which society is exposed today is that of another shipwreck on this rock. Singularly enough, systematic communism –the deliberate negation of property– is conceived under the direct influence of the proprietary prejudice; and property is the basis of all communistic theories. The members of a community, it is true, have no private property; but the community is proprietor, and proprietor not only of the goods, but of the persons and wills. In consequence of this principle of absolute property, labour, which should be only a condition imposed upon man by Nature, becomes in all communities a human commandment, and therefore odious. Passive obedience, irreconcilable with a reflecting will, is strictly enforced. Fidelity to regulations, which are always defective, however wise they may be thought, allows of no complaint. Life, talent, and all the human faculties are the property of the State, which has the right to use them as it pleases for the common good. Private associations are sternly prohibited, in spite of the likes and dislikes of different natures, because to tolerate them would be to introduce small communities within the large one, and consequently private property; the strong work for the weak, although this ought to be left to

benevolence, and not enforced, advised, or enjoined; the industrious work for the lazy though this is unjust; the clever work for the foolish, although this is absurd; and, finally, man –casting aside his personality, his spontaneity, his genius, and his affections– humbly annihilates himself at the feet of the majestic and inflexible Commune! Communism is inequality, but not as property is. Property is the exploitation of the weak by the strong.¹ Communism is the exploitation of the strong by the weak. In property, inequality of conditions is the result of force, under whatever name it be disguised: physical and mental force; force of events, chance, FORTUNE; force of accumulated property, etc. In communism, inequality springs from placing mediocrity on a level with excellence. This damaging equation is repellent to the conscience, and causes merit to complain; for although it may be the duty of the strong to aid the weak, they prefer to do it out of generosity, - they never will endure a comparison. Give them equal opportunities of labour, and equal wages, but never allow their jealousy to be awakened by mutual suspicion of unfaithfulness in the performance of the common task. Communism is oppression and slavery. Man is very willing to obey the law of duty, serve his country, and oblige his friends; but he wishes to labour when he pleases, where he pleases, and as much as he pleases. He wishes to dispose of his own time, to be governed only by necessity, to choose his friendships, his recreation, and his discipline; to act from judgement, not by command; to sacrifice himself through selfishness, not through servile obligation. Communism is essentially opposed to

the free exercise of our faculties, to our noblest desires, to our deepest feelings. Any plan which could be devised for reconciling it with the demands of the individual reason and will would end only in changing the thing while preserving the name. Now, if we are honest truth-seekers, we shall avoid disputes about words. Thus, communism violates the sovereignty of the conscience and equality: the first, by restricting spontaneity of mind and heart, and freedom of thought and action; the second, by placing labour and laziness, skill and stupidity, and even vice and virtue on an equality in point of comfort." [55]

REFERENCES

- [42] Ibid., p. 194.
- [43] Ibid., p. 194.
- [44] Ibid., p. 194.
- [45] Ibid., pp. 194-5.
- [46] Ibid., pp. 209-10.
- [47] Ibid., p. 214.
- [48] Kropotkine, "Paroles," p. 333.
- [49] Kropotkin, "Mutual Aid," p. 215.
- [50] Ibid., p. 217.
- [51] Ibid., p. 219.
- [52] Rudolf Rocker, "Nationalism and Culture," trans. Ray E. Chase (Los Angeles: Rocker Publications Committee, 1937), p. 92.
- [53] Ibid., p. 91.
- [54] Ibid., p. 92.
- [55] Proudhon, op. cit., pp. 248-51.

¹ See footnote 4 in serial installment #2.