

non serviam #3

A Critique of Communism and The Individualist Alternative

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Let us take a closer look at the type of society the communists would have us live under and see if we can get at the essence of these laws. Kropotkin says that "nine-tenths of those called lazy...are people gone astray." [14] He then suggests that given a job which "answers" their "temperament" and "capacities" (today we would hear words like "relate", "alienation" and "relevancy"), these people would be productive workers for the community. What about that other ten percent which couldn't adjust? Kropotkin doesn't elaborate, but he does say, "if not one, of the thousands of groups of our federation, will receive you, whatever be their motive; if you are absolutely incapable of producing anything useful, or if you refuse to do it, then live like an isolated man....That is what could be done in a communal society in order to turn away sluggards if they become too numerous." [15] This is a pretty harsh sentence considering that ALL the means of production have been confiscated in the name of the revolution. So we see that communism's law, put bluntly, becomes "work or starve."¹ This

¹ Article 12 of the 1936 constitution of the USSR reads: "In the USSR work is the duty of every able-bodied citizen according to the principle: 'He who does not work, neither shall he eat.' In the USSR the principle of socialism is realised: 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his work.'"

happens to be an individualist law too. But there is a difference between the two: the communist law is a man-made law, subject to man's emotions, rationalisations, and inconsistencies; the individualist law is nature's law - the law of gastric juices, if you will - a law which, like it or not, is beyond repeal. Although both laws use the same language, the difference in meaning is the difference between a commandment and a scientific observation. Individualist-anarchists don't care when, where, or how a man earns a living, as long as he is not invasive about it. He may work 18 hours a day and buy a mansion to live in the other six hours if he so chooses. Or he may feel like Thoreau did that "that man is richest whose pleasures are the cheapest" [16] and work but a few hours a week to ensure his livelihood. I wonder what would happen to Thoreau under communism? Kropotkin would undoubtedly look upon him as "a ghost of bourgeois society." [17] And what would Thoreau say to Kropotkin's proposed "contract"? "We undertake to give you the use of our houses, stores, streets, means of transport, schools, museums, etc., on condition that, from twenty to forty-five or fifty years of age, you consecrate four or five hours a day to some work recognised [by whom?] as necessary to existence....Twelve or fifteen hundred hours of work a year...is all we ask of you." [18] I don't think it would be pulling the nose of reason to argue that Thoreau would object to these terms.

But some communist-anarchists would reject Kropotkin's idea of not giving to the unproductive worker according to his needs, even if he doesn't contribute according to his abilities. They might simply say that Kropotkin wasn't being a good communist when he wrote those lines (just as he wasn't being a good anarchist when he supported the Allies during World War I). But this idea, it seems to me would be patently unjust to the poor workers who would have to support such parasites. How do these communists reconcile such an injustice? As best I can gather from the writings of the classical communist-anarchists, they meet this problem in one of two ways: (1) they ignore it, or (2) they deny it. Malatesta takes the first approach. When asked, "How will production and distribution be organised?" he replies that anarchists are not prophets and that they have no blueprints for the future. Indeed, he likens this important question to asking when a man "should go to bed and on what days he should cut his nails." [19] Alexander Berkman takes the other approach (a notion apparently borrowed from the Marxists):² he denies that unproductive men will exist after the revolution. "In an anarchist society it will be the most useful and difficult toil that one will seek rather than the lighter job." [20] Berkman's view of labour makes the protestant work ethic sound positively mild by comparison. For example: "Can you doubt that even the hardest toil would become a pleasure...in an atmosphere of brotherhood and respect for labour?" [21] Yes, I can doubt it. Or again: "We can visualise the time when labour will have become a pleasant exercise, a joyous

² At least Berkman is consistent in this matter. Marx, paradoxically, wanted to both "abolish labour itself" ("The German Ideology"), AND make it "life's prime want" ("Critique of the Gotha Programme").

application of physical effort to the needs of the world." [22] And again, in apparent anticipation of Goebbels' famous dictum about the powers of repetition, "Work will become a pleasure... laziness will be unknown." [23] It is hard to argue with such "reasoning". It would be like a debate between Bertrand Russell and Billy Graham about the existence of heaven. How can you argue with faith? I won't even try. I'll just ask the reader, next time he is at work, to look around –at himself and at his mates– and ask himself this question: "After the revolution will we really prefer this place to staying at home in bed or going off to the seashore?" If there are enough people who can answer "yes" to this question perhaps communism will work after all. But in the meantime, before building the barricades and shooting people for a cause of dubious certainty, I would suggest pondering these two items from the bourgeois and communist press respectively:

"In Detroit's auto plants, weekend absenteeism has reached such proportions that a current bit of folk wisdom advises car buyers to steer clear of vehicles made on a Monday or Friday. Inexperienced substitute workers, so the caution goes, have a way of building bugs into a car. But in Italy lately the warning might well include Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. At Fiat, the country's largest maker, absenteeism has jumped this year from the normal 4 or 5 percent to 12.5 percent, with as many as 18,000 workers failing to clock in for daily shifts at the company's Turin works. Alfa Romeo's rate has hit 15 percent as hundreds of workers call in each day with 'malattia di comodo' - a convenient illness.... Italian auto workers seem to be doing no more than taking advantage of a very good deal. A new labour contract guarantees

workers in state-controlled industries 180 days of sick leave a year, at full pay, while workers in private firms (such as Fiat) get the same number of days at 75 percent of full pay." [24]

When doctors, employed by the state, made an inspection visit in Turin we are told that they found "that only 20 percent of the 'indisposed' workers they had visited were even mildly sick." For those who think that this is just a bourgeois aberration, let us see what revolutionary Cuba, after 12 years of communism, has to say about such "parasites". I translate from the official organ of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party:

"Worker's discussion groups are being set up in all work centres to discuss the proposed law against laziness. These groups have already proven to be a valuable forum for the working class. During these assemblies, which for the moment are limited to pilot projects in the Havana area, workers have made original suggestions and posed timely questions which lead one to believe that massive discussion of this type would make a notable contribution to the solution of this serious problem. An assembly of boiler repairmen in the Luyano district was representative of the general feeling of the workers. They demanded that action be taken against those parasitic students who have stopped going to classes regularly or who, although attending classes, do just enough to get by. The workers were equally adamant about co-workers who, after a sickness or accident, refuse to go back to their jobs but go on receiving their salaries for months without working. Questions were often accompanied by concrete proposals. For example, should criminals receive the same salaries on coming back to work from prison as when they left

their jobs? The workers thought not, but they did think it all right that the revolutionary state accord a pension to the prisoner's family during his stay in the re-education [sic] centre. At the Papelera Cubana factory the workers made a suggestion which proved their contempt of these loafers; habitual offenders should be punished in geometric proportion to the number of their crimes. They also proposed that workers who quit their jobs or were absent too often be condemned to a minimum, not of 6 months, but of one year's imprisonment and that the worker who refuses three times work proposed by the Ministry of Labour be considered automatically as a criminal and subject to punishment as such. The workers also expressed doubts about the scholastic 'deserters', ages 15 and 16, who aren't yet considered physically and mentally able to work but who don't study either. They also cited the case of the self employed man who works only for his own selfish interests. The dockworkers of Havana port, zone 1, also had their meeting. They envisioned the possibility of making this law retroactive for those who have a bad work attitude, stating forcefully that it wasn't a question of precedents, because otherwise the law could only be applied in those cases which occurred after its enactment. The harbour workers also proposed imprisonment for the 'sanctioned' workers and that, in their opinion, the punishment of these parasites shouldn't be lifted until they could demonstrate a change of attitude. The steadfastness of the workers was clearly demonstrated when they demanded that punishments not be decided by the workers themselves in order to avoid possible leniency due to reasons of sympathy, sentimentality, etc. The workers also indicated that these parasites should

not have the right to the social benefits accorded to other workers. Some workers considered imprisonment as a measure much too kind. As you can see, the workers have made many good proposals, which leads us to believe that with massive discussion, this new law will be considerably enriched. This is perhaps the path to social legislation by the masses."³ [25]

These two extracts clearly demonstrate that human nature remains pretty constant, independent of the social system the individual workman is subjected to. So it seems to me that unless human nature can somehow be miraculously transformed by the revolution –and that WOULD be a revolution– some form of compulsion would be necessary in order to obtain "from each according to his abilities."

³ The Associated Press has since reported the passage of this law: "Cuba's Communist regime announced yesterday a tough new labour law that Premier Fidel Castro said is aimed at 400,000 loafers, bums and 'parasites' who have upset the country's new social order. The law, which goes into effect April 1, provides for penalties ranging from six months to two years of forced labour in 'rehabilitation centres' for those convicted of vagrancy, malingering or habitual absenteeism from work or school. The law decrees that all males between 17 and 60 have a 'social duty' to work on a daily systematic basis unless they are attending an approved school. Those who do not are considered 'parasites of the revolution' and subject to prosecution by the courts or special labourers' councils. The anti-loafing law - seen as a tough new weapon to be used mainly against dissatisfied young people - was prompted by Mr. Castro's disclosure last September that as many as 400,000 workers were creating serious economic problems by shirking their duties." [26]

While on this point, I would like to ask my communist-anarchist comrades just who is supposed to determine another person's abilities? We've seen from the above article that in Cuba the Ministry of Labour makes this decision. How would it differ in an anarchist commune? If these anarchists are at all consistent with their professed desire for individual freedom, the only answer to this question is that the individual himself would be the sole judge of his abilities and, hence, his profession. But this is ridiculous. Who, I wonder, is going to decide of his own free will that his real ability lies in collecting other people's garbage? And what about the man who thinks that he is the greatest artist since Leonardo da Vinci and decides to devote his life to painting mediocre landscapes while the community literally feeds his delusions with food from the communal warehouse? Few people, I dare say, would opt to do the necessary "dirty work" if they could choose with impunity ANY job, knowing that whatever they did –good or bad, hard or easy– they would still receive according to their needs.⁴ The individualist's answer to this perennial question of "who will do the dirty work" is very simple: "I will if I'm paid well enough." I suspect even Mr. Heath would go down into the London sewers if he were paid 5 million pounds per hour for doing it. Somewhere between this sum and what a sewer worker now gets is a just wage,

⁴ Anyone who has ever gone to an anarchist summer camp knows what I mean. Here we have "la creme de la creme", so to speak, just dying to get on with the revolution; yet who cleans out the latrines? More often than not, no one. Or, when it really gets bad, some poor sap will sacrifice himself for the cause. You don't have solidarity; you have martyrdom. And no one feels good about it: you have resentment on the part of the guy who does it and guilt from those who don't.

which, given a truly free society, would be readily determined by competition.

This brings us to the second half of the communist ideal: the distribution of goods according to need. The obvious question again arises, "Who is to decide what another man needs?" Anarchists once more must leave that decision up to the individual involved. To do otherwise would be to invite tyranny, for who can better determine a person's needs than the person himself?⁵ But if the individual is to decide for himself what he needs, what is to prevent him from "needing" a yacht and his own private airplane? If you think we've got a consumer society now, what would it be like if everything was free for the needing? You may object that luxuries aren't needs. But that is just begging the question: what is a luxury, after all? To millions of people in the world today food is a luxury. To the English central heating is a luxury, while to the Americans it's a necessity. The Nazi concentration camps painfully demonstrated just how little man actually NEEDS. But is that the criterion communists would use for determining need? I should hope (and think) not. So it seems to me that this poses a definite dilemma for the communist-anarchist: what do you do about unreasonable, irrational, or extravagant "needs"? What about the man who "needs" a new pair of shoes every month? "Nonsense," you may say, "no one needs new shoes that often." Well, how often then? Once a year? Every five years perhaps? And who will decide? Then what about me? I live in Switzerland and I'm

⁵ I'm reminded here of the tale of the man who decided his mule didn't NEED any food. He set out to demonstrate his theory and almost proved his point when, unfortunately, the beast died. Authoritarian communism runs a similar risk when it attempts to determine the needs of others.

crazy about grape jam - but unfortunately the Swiss aren't. I feel that a jam sandwich isn't a jam sandwich unless it's made with GRAPE jam. But tell that to the Swiss! If Switzerland were a communist federation, there wouldn't be a single communal warehouse which would stock grape jam. If I were to go up to the commissar-in-charge-of-jams and ask him to put in a requisition for a few cases, he would think I was nuts. "Grapes are for wine," he'd tell me with infallible logic, "and more people drink wine than eat grape jam." "But I'm a vegetarian," I plead, "and just think of all the money (?) I'm saving the commune by not eating any of that expensive meat." After which he would lecture me on the economics of jam making, tell me that a grape is more valuable in its liquid form, and chastise me for being a throwback to bourgeois decadence.

And what about you, dear reader? Have you no individual idiosyncrasies? Perhaps you've got a thing about marshmallows. What if the workers in the marshmallow factories decide (under workers' control, of course) that marshmallows are bad for your health, too difficult to make, or just simply a capitalist plot? Are you to be denied the culinary delights that only marshmallows can offer, simply because some distant workers get it into their heads that a marshmallowless world would be a better world?

But, not only would distribution according to need hurt the consumer, it would be grossly unfair to the productive worker who actually makes the goods or performs the necessary services. Suppose, for example, that hardworking farmer Brown goes to the communal warehouse with a load of freshly dug potatoes. While there Brown decides he needs a new pair of boots. Unfortunately there are only a few pairs in stock since Jones the shoemaker quit his job - preferring to spend his days

living off Brown's potatoes and writing sonnets about the good life. So boots are rationed. The boot commissar agrees that Brown's boots are pretty shabby but, he points out, Smith the astrologer is in even greater need. Could Brown come back in a month or so when BOTH soles have worn through? Brown walks away in disgust, resolved never again to sweat over his potato patch.

Even today people are beginning to complain about the injustices of the (relatively mild) welfare state. Theodore Roszak writes that in British schools there has been a "strong trend away from the sciences over the past four years" and that people are showing "annoyed concern" and "loudly observing that the country is not

spending its money to produce poets and Egyptologists - and then demanding a sharp cut in university grants and stipends." [27] If people are upset NOW at the number of poets and Egyptologists that they are supporting, what would it be like if EVERYONE could simply take up his favourite hobby as his chosen profession? I suspect it wouldn't be long before our professional chess players and mountain climbers found the warehouse stocks dwindling to nothing. Social unrest would surely increase in direct proportion to the height of the trash piling up on the doorsteps and the subsequent yearning for the "good old days" would bring about the inevitable counter-revolution. Such would be the fate of the anarchist-communist utopia.