

non serviam #4

A Critique of Communism and The Individualist Alternative

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Peter Kropotkin opens his chapter on "Consumption and Production" in "The Conquest of Bread" with the following words:

"If you open the works of any economist you will find that he begins with PRODUCTION, the analysis of means employed nowadays for the creation of wealth; division of labour, manufacture, machinery, accumulation of capital. From Adam Smith to Marx, all have proceeded along these lines. Only in the latter parts of their books do they treat of CONSUMPTION, that is to say, of the means necessary to satisfy the needs of individuals....Perhaps you will say this is logical. Before satisfying needs you must create the wherewithal to satisfy them. But before producing anything, must you not feel the need of it? Is it not necessity that first drove man to hunt, to raise cattle, to cultivate land, to make implements, and later on to invent machinery? Is it not the study of needs that should govern production?"[28] When I first came upon these words, I must admit I was rather surprised. "What have we here," I thought, "is the prince of anarchist-communism actually going to come out in favour of the consumer?" It didn't take long to find out that he wasn't. Most communists try very hard to ignore the fact that the sole purpose of

production is consumption. But not Kropotkin; he first recognises the fact - and THEN he ignores it. It's only a matter of three pages before he gets his head back into the sand and talks of "how to reorganise PRODUCTION so as to really satisfy all needs." [My emphasis]

Under communism it is not the consumer that counts; it is the producer. The consumer is looked upon with scorn - a loathsome, if necessary, evil. The worker, on the other hand, is depicted as all that is good and heroic. It is not by accident that the hammer and sickle find themselves as the symbols of the Russian "workers' paradise." Can you honestly imagine a communist society raising the banner of bread and butter and declaring the advent of the "consumers' paradise"? If you can, your imagination is much more vivid than mine.

But that's exactly what individualist-anarchists would do. Instead of the communist's "workers' control" (i.e. a producers' democracy), we advocate a consumers' democracy. Both democracies -like all democracies- would in fact be dictatorships. The question for anarchists is which dictatorship is the least oppressive? The answer should be obvious. But, judging from the ratio of communists to individualists in the anarchist movement,

apparently it's not. So perhaps I'd better explain.

The workers in some given industry decide that item A should no longer be produced and decide instead to manufacture item B. Now consumer X, who never liked item A anyway, couldn't care less; but poor Y feels his life will never be the same without A. What can Y do? He's just a lone consumer and consumers have no rights in this society. But maybe other Y's agree with him. A survey is taken and it is shown that only 3% of all consumers regret the passing of A. But can't some compromise be arrived at? How about letting just one tiny factory make A's? Perhaps the workers agree to this accommodation. Perhaps not. In any case the workers' decision is final. There is no appeal. The Y's are totally at the mercy of the workers and if the decision is adverse, they'll just have to swallow hard and hope that next week item C isn't taken away as well. So much for the producers' dictatorship.

Let's now take a look at the consumers' dictatorship. Consumers are finicky people - they want the best possible product at the lowest possible price. To achieve this end they will use ruthless means. The fact that producer X asks more for his product than Y asks for his similar product is all that the consumer needs to know. He will mercilessly buy Y's over X's. The extenuating circumstances matter little to him. X may have ten children and a mother-in-law to feed. The consumer still buys from Y. Such is the nature of the consumers' dictatorship over the producer.

Now there is a fundamental difference between these two dictatorships. In the one the worker says to the consumer, "I will produce what I want and if you don't like it you can lump it." In the other the consumer says to the worker, "You will produce what I want and if you don't I will

take my business elsewhere." It doesn't take the sensitive antennae of an anarchist to see which of these two statements is the more authoritarian. The first leaves no room for argument; there are no exceptions, no loopholes for the dissident consumer to crawl through. The second, on the other hand, leaves a loophole so big that it is limited only by the worker's imagination and abilities. If a producer is not doing as well as his competitor, there's a reason for it. He may not be suited for that particular work, in which case he will change jobs. He may be charging too much for his goods or services, in which case he will have to lower his costs, profits, and/or overhead to meet the competition. But one thing should be made clear: each worker is also a consumer and what the individual loses in his role as producer by having to cut his costs down to the competitive market level, he makes up in his role as consumer by being able to buy at the lowest possible prices.¹

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Let us turn our attention now to the various philosophies used by communists to justify their social system. The exponents of any social change invariably claim that people will be "happier" under their system than they now are under the status quo. The big metaphysical question then becomes, "What is happiness?" Up

¹ The usual objection raised to a "consumers' democracy" is that capitalists have used similar catch phrases in order to justify capitalism and keep the workers in a subjugated position. Individualists sustain this objection but point out that capitalists are being inconsistent by not practicing what they preach. If they did, they would no longer be in a position of privilege, living off the labour of others. This point is made clear in the section on capitalism later in this article.

until recently the communists –materialists par excellence– used to say it was material well-being. The main gripe they had against capitalism was that the workers were NECESSARILY in a state of increasing poverty. Bakunin, echoing Marx, said that "the situation of the proletariat...by virtue of inevitable economic law, must and will become worse every year." [29] But since World War II this pillar of communist thought has become increasingly shaky - particularly in the United States where "hard hats" are now pulling in salaries upwards of four quid an hour. This fact has created such acute embarrassment among the faithful that many communists are now seeking a new definition of happiness which has nothing to do with material comfort.

Very often what they do in discarding the Marxist happiness albatross is to saddle themselves with a Freudian one.² The new definition of happiness our neo-Freudian communists arrive at is usually derived from what Otto Fenichel called the "Nirvana principle." The essence of this theory is that both life-enhancing behaviour (e.g. sexual intercourse, eating) and life-inhibiting behaviour (e.g. war, suicide) are alternative ways of escaping from tension. Thus Freud's life instinct and death instinct find their common ground in Nirvana where happiness means a secure and carefree existence. This sounds to me very much like the Christian conception of heaven. But with communism, unlike heaven, you don't have to give up your life to get in - just your humanity.

² Wilhelm Reich and R. D. Laing are among the latest gurus of the libertarian left. And it's not uncommon in anarchist circles to hear a few sympathetic words about Herbert Marcuse's "Eros and Civilisation," despite the author's totalitarian tendencies.

Homer Lane used to have a little anecdote which illustrates the point I'm trying to make about the communist idea of happiness:

"A dog and a rabbit are running down a field. Both apparently are doing the same thing, running and using their capacity to the full. Really there is a great difference between them. Their motives are different. One is happy, the other unhappy. The dog is happy because he is trying to do something with the hope of achieving it. The rabbit is unhappy because he is afraid. A few minutes later the position is reversed; the rabbit has reached his burrow and is inside panting, whilst the dog is sitting outside panting. The rabbit is now happy because it is safe, and therefore no longer afraid. The dog is unhappy because his hope has not been realised. Here we have the two kinds of happiness of which each one of us is capable - happiness based on the escape from danger, and happiness based on the fulfillment of a hope, which is the only true happiness." [30]

I leave it to the reader as an exercise in triviality to decide which of these two types of happiness is emphasised by communism. While on the subject of analogies, I'd like to indulge in one of my own. Generally speaking there are two kinds of cats: the "lap cat" and the "mouser." The former leads a peaceful existence, leaving granny's lap only long enough to make a discreet trip to its sandbox and to lap up a saucer of milk. The latter lives by catching mice in the farmer's barn and never goes near the inside of the farm house. The former is normally fat and lazy; the latter skinny and alert. Despite the lap cat's easier life, the mouser wouldn't exchange places with him if he could, while the lap cat COULDN'T exchange places if he would. Here we have

two cats –perhaps even from the same litter– with two completely different attitudes toward life. The one expects a clean sandbox and food twice a day - and he is rarely disappointed. The other has to work for a living, but generally finds the reward worth while. "Now what has this got to do with the subject at hand?" I hear you cry. Just this: the communists would make "lap cats" of us all. "But what's so bad about that?" you may ask. To which I would have to reply (passing over the stinky problem of WHO will change the sandbox), "Have you ever tried to 'domesticate' a mouser?"

Communism, in its quest for a tranquil, tensionless world, inevitably harks back to the Middle Ages. Scratch a communist and chances are pretty good you'll find a mediaevalist underneath. Paul Goodman, for example, derives his ideal "community of scholars" from Bologna and Paris models based in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. [31] Erich Fromm writes longingly of "the sense of security which was characteristic of man in the Middle Ages....In having a distinct, unchangeable, and unquestionable place in the social world from the moment of birth, man was rooted in a structuralised whole, and thus life had a meaning which left no place, and no need, for doubt. A person was identical with his role in society; he was a peasant, an artisan, a knight, and not AN INDIVIDUAL who HAPPENED to have this or that occupation. The social order was conceived as a natural order, and being a definite part of it gave man a feeling of security and of belonging. There was comparatively little competition. One was born into a certain economic position which guaranteed a livelihood determined by tradition. [32] Kropotkin goes even further than Fromm. I'd like to examine his position in some detail because I think it is very instructive of how the communist mentality works. In perhaps his best-

known book, "Mutual Aid," Kropotkin devotes two of its eight chapters to glorifying the Middle Ages, which he boldly claim were one of "the two greatest periods of [mankind's] history." [33] (The other one being ancient Greece. He doesn't say how he reconciles this with the fact that Greece was based firmly on a foundation of slavery). "No period of history could better illustrate the constructive powers of the popular masses than the tenth and eleventh centuries...but, unhappily, this is a period about which historical information is especially scarce." [34] I wonder why? Could it be that everyone was having such a good time that no one found time to record it? Kropotkin writes of the mediaeval cities as "centres of liberty and enlightenment." [35] The mediaeval guilds, he says, answered "a deeply inrooted want of human nature," [36] calling them "organisations for maintaining justice." [37] Let's see what Kropotkin means here by "justice":

"If a brother's house is burned, or he has lost his ship, or has suffered on a pilgrim's voyage, all the brethren MUST come to his aid. If a brother falls dangerously ill, two brethren MUST keep watch by his bed till he is out of danger, and if he dies, the brethren must bury him –a great affair in those times of pestilences [Kropotkin must have been dozing to admit this in his Utopia]– and follow him to the church and the grave. After his death they MUST provide for his children....If a brother was involved in a quarrel with a stranger to the guild, they agreed to support him for bad and for good; that is, whether he was unjustly accused of aggression, OR REALLY WAS THE AGGRESSOR, they HAD to support him....They went to court to support by oath the truthfulness of his statements, and if he was found guilty they did not let him

go to full ruin and become a slave through not paying the due compensation; they all paid it...Such were the leading ideas of those brotherhoods which gradually covered the whole of mediaeval life." [38] (My emphasis)

And such is Kropotkin's conception of "justice," which could better be described as a warped sense of solidarity. He goes on to say, "It is evident that an institution so well suited to serve the need of union, without depriving the individual of his initiative, could but spread, grow, and fortify." [39] "We see not only merchants, craftsmen, hunters, and peasants united in guilds; we also see guilds of priests, painters, teachers of primary schools and universities, guilds for performing the passion play, for building a church, for developing the 'mystery' of a given school of art or craft, or for a special recreation - even guilds among beggars, executioners, and lost women, all organised on the same double principle of self-jurisdiction and mutual support." [40] It was such "unity of thought" which Kropotkin thinks "can but excite our admiration." [41]

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