

Egoism: The Basis for Communism

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“It is, above all, necessary to avoid once more establishing ‘society’ as an abstraction over against the individual.” - Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts

“We are communists out of egoism also, and it is out of egoism that we wish to be human beings, not mere individuals.” - Friedrich Engels, Letter to Karl Marx, 19 November 1844

“The labourers have the most enormous power in their hands, and, if they once became thoroughly conscious of it and used it, nothing would withstand them; they would only have to stop labour, regard the product of labour as theirs, and enjoy it.” - Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*

Many leftists have an allergy to anything that reeks of individualism. Talk of “the individual” and his “sovereignty”, for them, is the domain of the acolytes of Ayn Rand and the ideologues of neoliberalism. While good leftists religiously revere “the common good”, “social welfare” and “the collective”. In quotidian discourse, it is simply assumed that capitalism equals “individualism” while communism equals “collectivism”. I think it’s about time these prejudices were revisited.

It mustn’t be forgotten that the original critique of individualism came from the conservative reaction to the French revolution. The first use of the term “individualism” was arguably by Joseph De Maistre as a term of abuse. He and others such as Edmund Burke charged individualism and the Enlightenment philosophy it undergirded with weakening the foundations of the social order and dissolving traditional bonds based on religion, rank and custom in favor of an atomizing and leveling doctrine of individual natural rights, which freed each individual to focus on his own egotistic desires over his duty to “the community”. For many socialists, capitalist society is to be condemned not just for its exploitation of the working class by the bourgeoisie, but for the individualistic character of social relationships it produces, whether it’s the rational pursuit of self-interest or the reinforcement of competitive, acquisitive and possessive attitudes. There is, of course, some convergence with the conservative critique of individualism, but most socialists don’t seek to revive traditional civilization, but to create a future utopia, in common imagination, in which cooperative, socially minded, non-acquisitive individuals share in the common task of producing and distributing goods to meet social needs at a more equitable level.

Even Marx, according to a ubiquitous stereotype, promulgated by critics and epigones alike, was just another socialist thinker who emphasized “the social” over the individual. Yet, this opposition between the individual and the social would have made no sense to Marx. Marx was one of the great philosophers of freedom precisely because he understood the intrinsic relationship between individual and social freedom. The freedom of the individual, the freedom to realize his almost boundless potential, is the standard against which a society ought to be judged. As much as anything else,

Marx's critique of capitalism was motivated by the fact that capitalist society had failed the individual. He could not truly flourish so long as he labored under the dictatorship of capital.

It's an elementary point: If the individual isn't free, then society is in no sense free too. The Communist Manifesto put it like this: "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." In other words, the freedom of the individual is the *sine qua non* for the freedom of all.

Calling oneself a libertarian communist, an individualist communist or an egoist-communist to most is an oxymoron. But I like to claim those labels for myself because they upend the stale stereotype of the deluded, selfless, do-gooder communist. In other words, I am a communist because I am an individualist. To go further, I am a communist because I am a greedy motherfucker. I don't aspire to own the means of production just to better my quality of life; I want to own the means because I want to be the owner. I want to own of the entire wealth and culture of society. I want the world to be my property. I want it all. I don't want my life determined by my class position, or my "race", or what piece of territory I was born on. To give individuals the power and freedom to shape their fate and to become the co-owners of society, class must be transcended altogether. Egoism is the basis for communism; indeed, it's the only rational basis for communism.

Invocations of "egoism" means one, almost inevitably, will have to engage with Max Stirner, the Godfather of Egoism and an inspiration for particular strains of anarchism. Like Marx, Stirner moved within Young Hegelian circles, but later broke with their liberal humanism to go his own way. In *The Ego and Its Own*, Stirner made the case for a radical subjectivist individualism. His Ego is based on "Ownness", or autonomy, where one's freedom isn't defined by the state, community or any other institution, but exists wholly within oneself. All that we are subject to – religion, morality, the nation, the state, common humanity – are "spooks", social constructs that we sacralize and thus enslave ourselves and subject our autonomy to. Communism for Stirner – he had in mind Proudhon and Weitling – was also a spook, a doctrine of equal immiseration, where the phantom that is "society" owns everything, but nothing is left for existing individuals.

It would be easy to dismiss Stirner as a childish anarchist or portray him in vulgar Marxist terms as a petit-bourgeois gadfly. But the strength of Stirner is how he explicates how "society" can operate less as a platform for individual freedom and more as an alien force in all sorts of ways that suppress it. There is something refreshing in how unapologetic he is in asserting his Ownness against any idea or structure that seeks to assimilate him. On first impression, Stirner's egoism and Marx and Engels' communism would seem irrevocably antagonistic. But in fact, both Marx and Engels were rather fascinated with Stirner, in part because both their criticisms of the Young Hegelians converged in many respects. We know Engels wrote a gushing letter to Marx on the matter. Of Stirner's egoism, he wrote that "it is so absurd and at the same time so self-aware, that it cannot maintain itself even for an instant in its one-sidedness,

but must immediately change into Communism.” There is no record of Marx’s reply, but we can guess that he wasn’t as taken by Stirner as Engels was. But even he was influenced enough to dedicate himself to a substantial critique of Stirner.

Most people know *The German Ideology* for its exposition of the materialist conception of history through a critique of Feuerbach’s contemplative, inconsistent materialism and abstract and ahistorical humanism. I can bet that most Marxists have barely read the “saint Max” chapter in any depth. Yet, the fact the Saint Max chapter is the largest section of the book suggests they took Stirner’s Ego and Its Own rather seriously. A formidable foe who deserved to be answered, and in the process of answering, help clarify what we now call “Marxism” against a cruder version of socialism. In the words of David McLellan, engagement with Stirner “played a very important role in the development of Marx’s thought by detaching him from the influence of Feuerbach”.

Now, Marx’s criticism was often sardonic and occasionally uncharitable to Stirner. Parts of it won’t make sense unless you’re familiar with Don Quixote by Cervantes – he’s fond of trolling Stirner as “sancho” after Don Quixote’s sidekick, Sancho Panza. The core problem with Stirner’s Ego is that it’s premised on an asocial blank slate. It abstracts the Ego away from history, as though unique individuals, fully capable of developing their own powers arise ex nihilo. For his critique of ideology to be meaningful it needs to be embedded with a critique of the material origin of these spooks so that one can adequately abolish them. Then the Ego can truly realize itself and develop even more.

Civilization is necessarily a co-operative enterprise, and it is out of this process that the individual comes into being. This is not to deny the Ego and his potential; it is to give the depth and texture it deserves. As Marx explains, great and unique individuals are conditioned by historical development and it is foolish to pretend otherwise:

Sancho imagines that Raphael produced his pictures independently of the division of labour that existed in Rome at the time. If he were to compare Raphael with Leonardo da Vinci and Titian, he would see how greatly Raphael’s works of art depended on the flourishing of Rome at that time, which occurred under Florentine influence... Raphael as much as any other artist was determined by the technical advances in art made before him, by the organisation of society and the division of labour in his locality, and, finally, by the division of labour in all the countries with which his locality had intercourse. Whether an individual like Raphael succeeds in developing his talent depends wholly on demand, which in turn depends on the division of labour and the conditions of human culture resulting from it.

Overall, the engagement with Stirner was crucial for clarifying the relationship between egoism and class struggle. If people really are the rational, autonomous, self-interested individuals that bourgeois society takes them to be, yet the contradictions

of capitalism work as a fetter against their “Ownness”, then out of their own egotistic self-interest enough people will form a “union of Egos” and co-operate with each other to transcend the system altogether. Thus, communism can be brought about, as Marx and Engels state, without an antinomy between self-interest and solidarity:

Communism is quite incomprehensible to [the anarchist and individualist Max Stirner] because the communists do not oppose egoism to selflessness or selflessness to egoism, nor do they express this contradiction theoretically either in its sentimental or in its high-flown ideological form; they rather demonstrate its material source, with which it disappears of itself. The communists do not preach morality at all, as Stirner does so extensively. They do not put to people the moral demand: love one another, do not be egoists, etc.; on the contrary, they are very well aware that egoism, just as much as selflessness, is in definite circumstances a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals. Hence, the communists by no means want...to do away with the “private individual” for the sake of the “general,” selfless man.

What will drive the working class to struggle for communism isn’t some vapid, vague belief in “Justice”, or maudlin sentimentality, but the desire for their own self-enjoyment and self-actualization. Communism will be brought about through the “selfishness”, “greed” and “lust for wealth” that capitalism is unable to satiate. When Oswald Spengler condemned Marxism as the “capitalism of the lower classes”, he was more right than he knew. Moreover, communism seeks to create a world where people really relate to each other as unique individuals without the mediation of a state, or as avatars of race, nation, ethnicity, tribe, culture or any other “spook” you can conjure. Stirner’s Egoism is the prelude to Marxian communism. Or as Jacob Blumenfeld put it, “Stirner’s egoism is Marx’s communism seen from the first-person singular perspective”.

The tragedy of history is that for so long the freedom of some depended on the enslavement and exploitation of the rest. What is unprecedented about the modern epoch is the concrete potential for universal freedom. An Athens without slaves or masters. When we speak of “collective freedom” or the freedom of society, we speak of the freedom of each individual that constitutes society, because we recognize that “society” would be nothing without the creative powers of the individuals who compose it.

Communism would entail a sociality that doesn’t obliterate the individualism of bourgeois society but build upon it and enrich it. Truly sovereign unique selves can only flourish under communism. Communism is the apotheosis of individualism. The great thing about communism, as Oscar Wilde pointed out, is that the individual will be liberated from the sordid necessity of living for others.

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