

Marxism and the Individual: A Progressive and Reactionary View

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This is a critique of common views of the individual as a philosophical entity from within Marxism. It discusses the relation of Fascism to Liberalism to Marxism through the discussion of the individual as it is viewed across these theories. It is divided in two parts: first, on the proper anti-fascist theory of the individual which is present in parts of Marxism, and second, on the parts of Marxism which deny this theory and their subsequent pitfalls.

1. The Socialist Individual

It should go without saying that Marxism rejects “individualism” as bourgeois, but what of “collectivism”? “Individualism” certainly goes hand-in-hand with individual private property and capital accumulation — the foundation of capitalism — but I want to argue that its supposed counterpart, “collectivism,” is equally as capitalist.

This is not just because part of the reason “collectivism” exists in common parlance today at all is as a fear-inducing term to which no right-minded person should want (in order to make “individualism” seem more plausible), but also because its faulty theoretical foundation is the foundation of fascism, the bourgeois revolution.

Fascism is the poor man's collectivism: a simple theory about self-sacrifice to an eternal godlike trinity of nation, tradition, and some cultish diety (repeat steps 1–2 with a different God for new effects.) Fascism sees subsumption of the self into the holy nation as a historical event which will live on as far as possible into eternal future, the long-lost ruins of its structures still standing magnificently (Hitler's structures were designed to.)

This vulgar collectivism, however, is bourgeois because it takes the same framework of bourgeois individualism but merely in the other extreme. It is not the individual who is the ahistorical, eternal being outside of all formulae and structures; it is the collective who is. But what the hell is a collective if it no longer contains individuals in it? It is no more than a bigger individual with more working parts.

Enter the socialist, more Marxist, view. Neither the individual nor the collective are truer than the other at any one time. One forms the other in a back-and-forth dialectic. Socialism is the true liberation of the individual because it “*make[s] individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land, and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labor, into mere instruments of free and associated labor.*” [1] Socialism is freedom of the individual from the specter of capital and its strangle-hold, freedom from class, and today it will chiefly be freedom from *work*.

This last point is crucial, as socialism is not merely working less, but a whole philosophical transformation of the necessity of “self-sacrifice”; in other words, socialism is the accumulation of *leisure-time* into one's life, not just the phasing out of forced labor. It read on the entrance to Auschwitz, the most brutal of all the Nazi extermination camps, “*Arbeit Macht Frei*” (work makes you free); it is this spirit of Puritan-level self-sacrifice which layers Fascism, and it is simultaneously the high hopes of Marxist writers like Mark Fisher who cry out in essays such as *Acid Communism*, the complete opposite — for a “*world without drugery*” (meaning a world without work.) In socialism, the elimination of precariousness caused by markets is the accumulation of freedom for self-enjoyment, self-

fulfillment, etc. Socialism is an unalienated society which no longer needs Gods to submit to, nor kings to bow to; it is precisely in Marx's lambasting of religion as the "*sigh of the oppressed creature*" that he contained such high hopes for a future man who could carve his own meaning out of his life without the need for religion or other crutches — Nietzsche's *übermensch*.

Here is where fascism diverges — it sees all of this freedom which flows between the individual and the collective simultaneously as dangerous to its bourgeois position. So, it must adopt a vulgar collectivism which can temporarily unite alienated souls in times of economic crisis. But fascism is capitalist totalitarianism writ so massively large because the theory must end there; the individual becomes the collective which becomes a new individual in itself, and it is in this philosophical framework that capital can remain untrammelled.

2. Confusions

But not every Marxist would agree, and it is here that they show their bourgeois side: in their compassion for the individualism/collectivism dichotomy. Primarily it emerges in their half-baked attempts to refute anarchism. Engels, for example, iterates an infamous objection to anarchism in *On Authority* which is also reiterated in a letter to Theodore Cuno in 1872:

“...but as to how a society, even of only two people, is possible unless each gives up some of his autonomy, Bakunin again remains silent.”

What Engels is doing, in essence, is beginning from a framework of total individuation which is only then followed by the collective and also by some necessary diminishing of liberties. This is the framework of Max Stirner as well, who states *The Ego and Its Own* that,

“A society to which I affiliate certainly strips me of a few freedoms but it affords me other freedoms in compensation.”

This is also the framework of Freud, his theory of civilization, and the “reality principle.” The reason I say this is because this view, I believe, runs counter to the philosophical goals of any liberatory project, particularly a socialist one. Indeed, Marcuse spent *Eros and Civilization* attempting to refute Freud’s theory regarding this, which had become and remains so absolutely indispensable to the continuation of the current state of things (of which communism is supposed to abolish.)

The socialist view of the individual is lost here in this reversion into bourgeois ethics. In the truer view, the individual emerges from a collective to become an individual, and thus begins the back-and-forth dance of interaction and influence between the two that is life in society. To begin from the premise of a quasi-“state of nature” of total individuation, followed by some necessary suppression, is the very framework of the individualists (and of the fascists, merely in the other extreme) to which Marxism was attempting to combat. The truer framework, *transindividuality* (to use Jason Read’s term), is the framework which grants the most right to the collective and its ability to empower freedom in the individual, rather than viewing it as some necessary evil.

We can throw in Lenin too, who declared in *Socialism and Anarchism*, regarding anarchism, that “*Their individualistic theories and their individualistic ideal are the very opposite of socialism.*” If Lenin is not woefully misinformed about anarchism, then his declaration is not only wrong, but disappointing. That is, *if* his view is a more nuanced denunciation of emphasis on the individual spirit in anarchism, and not simply a common misunderstanding of the movement, then it is disappointing because it points Lenin’s own movement in the wrong direction for reasons stated.

[1] Marx, *Civil War in France*, “The Paris Commune”