

Against Individualism and Collectivism: A polemic for freedom in Leftism

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In the quest for freedom, both individualism and collectivism become obsolete, their ideological and subsequently vacuous nature revealed. There is no dichotomy between the two: neither are well-defined, and moreover, if one's goal is *freedom*, one should reject both. This essay will present why this is, why we continue to believe in such a dichotomy, and a new way forward.

Individualism

Let us begin with individualism. It was Sidney E. Parker in *Individualist-Anarchism* who defined individualism using John Beverly Robinson's words from *Egoism*:

“[T]he realization by the individual that she/he is above all institutions and all formulas; that they exist only so far as he chooses to make them her own by accepting them.”

On its face, the definition seems plausible. It posits that the individual comes first in choosing all of her associations and beliefs and not the other way around; that the individual makes the institution, not vice versa.

However, the individual does not exist before all institutions simply as a matter of fact. It is the institution of childbirth that births her and the institution of society that creates her essence as a cognizant individual through every step of her life. The individual is a social construction; the result of interplay between people, reflection, and dissonance, that creates a person able to see herself as *unique*. It is the result of society that the individual even develops her “tools of consciousness”: her ability to think, speak, and interact with others such that she realizes herself as apart from others. Moreover, this process never ceases: if the individual chose to cut herself off from society, her ability to distinguish herself, to “get out of her own head” so to speak, and develop richly and uniquely, would begin to fade away. In short, her individualism would kill her individual, the latter being her only means of living out individualism at all.

Let us now turn our attention to *freedom*. Individualists claim that only individualism can grant freedom, and suspending all disbelief about individualism itself, again this seems plausible. It is true that total freedom must be the expression of self-will without restraint from outside forces, be it morality, the state, the family, or other institutions. However, self-will is an outcome of the individual, and therefore also, in part, the outcome of the society which creates her. Self-will, to be sure, is a fragile thing which must be allowed to develop in the same way as the individual; as such, freedom is also the affair of society as it is of the individual. Individualism alone, then, is unable to provide the tools for freedom, and some would even argue it merely enables particularly destructive self-wills to dominate oneself and others, crushing her development.

Collectivism

Collectivism must be the reverse of individualism: the belief that the society, that the collective, or even merely other individuals, come before the individual. The collective chooses the individual, not vice versa.

Collectivism is again incomplete. A collective's will emerges from individual will as it does from collective will. The collective creates the individual who creates the collective, and so on. In order for this to be possible, the individual must contain both the seeds for individualism and collectivism which are sparked in development.

What of freedom? Collectivism grants the individual an arena dominated not by others' deleterious self-wills, but it can also itself stifle the emergence of the individual and her subsequent self-will itself. It seems paradoxical in a similar, but reversed, way to individualism.

Why the Dichotomy?

If neither is truly free and both philosophically incomplete, why do we cling to such terms? I believe the answer lies in ideology: in short, that our internalizing of this false dichotomy is the conscious result of a larger ideological purpose irrespective of truth.

To be clear, the dichotomy has not been a cornerstone of political philosophy for much of history. The discussion of "individualism versus collectivism" has not been the concern of philosophers, it seems, prior to the emergence of industrial capitalism. It was only in this stage of societal development that ideological ideas of "individualism" even became relevant — and this was not accidental.

Among these early individualist ideas was the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, which posited that ethical goodness could be measured by the sum total of *individual* human actions. Marx was quick to point out the purely ideological aims of this theory by first proving that human action could not be described and measured on a purely individual basis, and then enumerating how the flaws of this theory enabled capitalist self-will, i.e. the domination of man's private property over the masses. Marx was vindicated, long after his death, when the Neoclassical school of economics again took up utilitarianism with fervor in order to analyze and justify their radically capitalist theories.

Following utilitarianism, there was “methodological individualism” and other such tools used in economic context by the modern Austrian school of economics, spearheaded by Ludwig von Mises. From out of the individualist view of human action came the belief that society could at all be considered merely the sum total of the humans and their actions within it. With the biting obloquies of Mises against socialism and other form of collective action emerged the next piece of the puzzle: fear of collectivism.

From here rose Ayn Rand whose dystopic visions were of the “tyrannies of collectivism,” and whose background, in part, facilitated the subsequent uproar against the Soviet Union which became seen as “collectivist.” McCarthy’s Red Scare was followed by the age of Neoliberalism, whose ideology was radically and explicitly what they believed to be “individualist.” In American schools they still teach the “horrors of collectivism,” and the dominant ideology, although beginning to fade, still emphasizes “individual entrepreneurship,” “capitalist creative destruction,” etc.

Neoliberalism, being philosophically flawed in its adherence to “individualism,” lead to a general downward slope in the health of ordinary people. The teleological, or rather *material*, purpose of this ideology has now become laid bare: to protect the ruling classes. It has become illuminated as to why the philosophy of “individualism” and “collectivism” is so obviously nonsensical; its purpose was dominant ideology, not philosophical truth. From here Marx’s specter haunts us, having told us from even the days utilitarianism was conceived, that ideas are generally born and exist to serve some class; philosophical truth and honesty — *objectivity* — is essentially impossible. Ideas come from bodies, which are themselves subjective (as Nietzsche painstakingly elucidated), but ideas also emerge from society, in our case a *class* society, and as such will be subservient to the ideological needs of that society (the latter of which stems from the material needs of that society.)

A New Way Forward

Neoliberalism has failed, and with it the idea that “individualism” is desirable philosophically, but its failure has also revealed the lies hidden underneath the philosophy which underpinned it altogether. In order to break free of Neoliberalism we must break free of its terminology and philosophy. The answer is not “collectivism,” as so many leftists have and still do emphasize in contrast to the individualism of capital, but to reject the dichotomy of “individualism and collectivism” entirely.

The point of “collectivism” as an ideological term was to conjure images of tyranny, conformism, hivemindism, etc., so that it could become clear “individualism” was the only path to freedom. Right-wing “libertarianism,” and many “egoists,” for example, have taken the bait entirely, and it comes as no surprise that they come to the conclusion that some form of capitalism can be the only way to guarantee freedom.[1] If we are, as leftists, to truly desire freedom for *all*, we must kill both sides of the false dichotomy and seek a new understanding of freedom outside of the Neoliberal one.

However, if we are to reject freedom, as many Bordigists, Maoists, Marxist-Leninists, and others who contradict all Marx dreamed of do, we will have essentially no basis for positing our world over the current one. For Marx, it was capitalism that destroyed the individual spirit, made him robotic, and caged him. If our plan of socialism merely recreates this, we have failed at creating a better world in every tangible sense.

More to the point, if we are to use capitalist terminology (e.g. “collectivism”) to describe our socialist ideal, we will have failed at breaking free of capitalism philosophically. Freedom in a socialist world must be something novel and from outside of capitalist philosophy; if we use capitalist logic we will risk recreating capitalist relations anew.

What will this new freedom look like? I cannot say for sure because it must be conceived outside of the current consciousness within class society, but I imagine it should be an embrace of elements of what we call

“individualism” and “collectivism” simultaneously. That is, recognizing the collective nature of the individual *and* the individualist nature of the collective; recognizing the ways in which the individual flourishes in a collective atmosphere and not a brutally individuated one *and* the way in which the collective flourishes when it is ignited by the free brilliance of the individuals within it; recognizing that the collective is not merely the sum total of the individuals within it, but a larger entity which continually formulate consciousness itself, *and* recognizing that freedom comes from self-will — the result of that consciousness.

[1] Regarding egoists, it must be noted that Max Stirner — who has had a massive influence on egoism in general — was himself anticapitalist and conceived of his egoism as collective by choice. However, many of his adherents, e.g. Laurance Labadie and Sidney E. Parker, have turned to appraisal of capitalist logic.