

# Social Anarchism and Freedom - Postliterate - Medium

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“Anarchists are not separated in anyway from kinship with the devout. They belong to the Christians’ Church and should be recognised as Christianity’s picked children.” — Dora Marsden, *The Illusion of Anarchism*

One of the fundamental perversions at the heart of the theory of social anarchism is its erroneous conception of freedom. This conception is often shared by numerous others across the political landscape, so it is crucial it be discussed.

The social anarchist’s notion of freedom is as something which comes from society; something which society can grant to the individual (or the individual grant to society) when all humans reach a state of solidarity whereby they feel no need to oppress, exploit, and dominate each other. As the Accused Anarchists (which included Peter Kropotkin, Émile Pouget, and Louise Michel) put it:

“We want freedom, which is to say that we demand the right and the means for all human beings to do whatever pleases them, to fully satisfy all their needs, without any limit **but that imposed by their natural possibilities and the needs of their neighbors**, which are equally worthy of respect.” (My emphasis) [1]

Or, as Errico Malatesta writes: “*real, concrete freedom is the outcome of solidarity and voluntary cooperation.*” [2] This conception of freedom seems a logical one because naturally freedom can only exist so long as each individual is not having his freedom destroyed by others. In other words, saying each individual should be completely free to pursue his will must logically include even the free will to destroy free society, and is therefore paradoxical. One who permits freedom so vast it permits even the destruction of freedom is then no longer permitting freedom at all. Freedom, it seems, requires barriers, bindings of each individual to others, to ensure the freedom of *all*.

However, this notion is completely illogical. The only reason freedom seems paradoxical here is that we are not being specific on what we mean by freedom. Do we mean the freedom of the individual or of society? Social anarchists would say the latter, however the true answer is in fact the former.

Freedom is *not*, as the social anarchists claim, a state of society; it is purely the state of an individual. Freedom does not emanate nor originate from society, it emanates and originates from the *individual*. This is the view shared by individualists such as Max Stirner, and the view the social anarchists are so opposed to.

Stirner conceives of freedom as a purely individual affair, and therefore logically the freedom of the individual includes the freedom to destroy the freedom of others. As Stirner writes in his seminal work, *The Ego and Its Own*:

“My intercourse with the world, what does it aim at? I want to have the enjoyment of it, therefore it must be my property, and therefore I want to win it. I do not want the liberty of men, nor their equality; I want only my power over them, I want to make them my property, material for enjoyment.”

Stirner had no interest in the freedom of a “society” because he conceived of such things as a *Spuk* (or a *phantasm*, as they exist only in the mind). To Stirner, freedom meant complete control over oneself, and this freedom included freedom from obligations which are beckoned towards by abstractions (things higher than the self and his personal interests). Stirner understood that obligations to a “society” or a “greater good” could be just as oppressive as obligations to a state or church because both demand submission and constriction of the individual and his freedom. Stirner, in his introductory chapter to *The Ego and Its Own*, includes “the cause of freedom” as one of many causes which one is supposed to subordinate himself to, on par with God. To Stirner, serving “the freedom of society” was hardly different from serving God.

How do I know this to be true? As an example, the state derives and justifies its power from abstractions such as “the greater good”, “the health of society”, or “moral order”. It is therefore not enough to abolish the state to achieve freedom; we must also abolish that which gives the state its power, that which policies not our bodies but our *minds*: the spooks, the abstractions. These abstractions are “*internalized and desensualized into a thought, a conception, [who] now ranks as the ‘sacred,’ [and] whose despotism is tenfold more grievous because it makes a racket in my conscience.*” [3]

If the state supposedly acts to serve these higher causes (often even the cause of “freedom,” they claim), we must abolish these higher causes which give us the belief that they are justified. This is in the same way that we cannot merely abolish the boss, we must abolish the dollar which gives him such power.

Freedom, therefore, is not the affair of society. Just as the state cannot grant freedom, it only restricts it; society cannot grant freedom, it only restricts it. Freedom lies in freedom *from* these abstractions, not freedom *of* these abstractions. True freedom must know no bounds, for a bind is the limiting of freedom itself.

What is to be said in the case where one's freedom limits others? To Stirner, the answer is not particularly complex: because freedom is the affair of the individual, it is up to each individual to carve out his freedom. Individual wills may often conflict, but each individual is only as free as he wishes to be. Freedom cannot be granted, it can only be fought for because it can only come from the individual.

Freedom is the most individualist of concepts; it says that no obligation shall interfere with one's will, and this includes the will of others, or of "society." Because freedom must be solely concerned with the will of the individual, there can be no freedom as a state of society, as the social anarchists claim, just that there can be no freedom as a state of government. "Free society" is as much a perversion as "free state" or "free morality", because these concepts are defined not by what they allow people to do, but by what they *don't* allow people to do.

"Justice" is a spook which tells me what and what not to do. So too is the case with morality, so too is the case with society. I am free in my ability to pursue my wills freely and not in my obligations and bindings to the wills of others. I am therefore only free in myself and never in anything larger, whether it be "the nation", "society", or anything else.

"If the individual is the 'real, concrete being', as Malatesta claims, and not society, then let us hear no talk of any 'freedom' that is not someone's possession and property! There is no 'free society' but only free individuals in association and relationship with each other!" [4]

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[1] The Accused Anarchists, *Declaration to the Tribunal of Lyons*

[2] Errico Malatesta, *Communism and Individualism*

[3] Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, “The Hierarchy”

[4] Anarxista Goldman, *Egoism Explained*, “Why Anarchism Needs Egoism”