

The State of Individuality Under Capitalism and Socialism

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It is often remarked by dull right-wing free-market thinkers (and those hapless others who listen to them) that capitalism — defined for our purposes as a system of markets motivated by individual ownership of the means of production — is a truer embodiment of individualism than its antithesis, socialism. This claim seems, on the surface, plausible. If socialism is the collective ownership of the means of production, and the economic sphere of life plays an integral part in the development of a society's social structure, it seems only semantics are required to prove that socialism embodies a collectivist view of society. Thus capitalism, with its means of production owned at the individual level, represents an emphasis on individualism in a society. It even continues, then, that individual ownership of the means of production represents the most radical expression of decentralization —

anarchy — and thus forms a basis for the notion that capitalism is closer to anarchism than socialism is. Freedom, after all, is largely the affair of the individual.

However, this view is gravely mistaken. Firstly, it must be addressed the power markets play in shaping the individual's ability to actualize himself. The sort of markets which capitalism employs leave no room for the individual to participate in activities purely of his own volition without great cost to his well-being. Capitalism's markets require that an individual commit his work to the cause of the good of society, asking him to subordinate his will to society's. The painter may wish to paint a radical expression of himself in groundbreaking ways, but ultimately he will be unable to even live to continue this work if he does not first consider how he can serve society. The painter, then, must find what other people enjoy; often, in the fierce markets of capitalism it is simplest to resort to the production of vapid, consumer art. This is the art that may find content in the populace under capitalism, and they will respond by purchasing his products and thus allowing him subsistence. How is such a system which grants humans well-being only on the condition that they serve collective society at all individualist?

As an aside, it should be noted the many proposals for economic systems which reward individuals based on metrics other than one's contribution to society, such as the Participatory Economy → <https://zcomm.org/wp-content/uploads/zbooks/htdocs/books/polpar.htm> of Michael Albert. Albert's system seeks to reward individuals based upon the hard work and sacrifice they provide. This is a metric which knows no restrictions such as that imposed by individuals with disabilities or any other individual or social setbacks. This merely further illuminates how even potentially discriminatory capitalism's markets are in their staunch commitment to reward based only on the creation of a good which larger society will benefit from, further cementing the latter system as anti-individualist.

The second crucial element capitalist markets play in crushing the individual spirit is in the way it produces outside of the individual's needs. The market is not a perfect force which tunes itself to the pulse of the people; markets must remain within a threshold of acceptability among the populace, but ultimately individual producers in capitalist markets are the ones controlling the narrative. Consumers may be able to “vote with their dollars,” as right-wing free-market thinker Ludwig von Mises put it, but this is true only between what options are provided to consumers. Producers have the final say over the choices — or in other words, the conditions of one's free choice — and leave consumers only the choice *between* what the producer offers. Consumers often find themselves, rather than seeing producers tune to the wants of the consumers, needing to tune themselves to the wants of the producers. This is not always the case, but particularly under the monopolistic markets which appear under capitalism, the power leveraged by producers far exceeds the power of the consumer — the power of the consumer being the power to deny purchase of certain commodities in order to determine for oneself what the consumer's wants are. This is the dilemma which Marcuse understood so well when he wrote in *Eros and Civilization*:

“In exchange for the commodities that enrich their lives [...] individuals sell not only their labour but also their free time. [...] People dwell in apartment concentrations — and have private automobiles with which they can no longer escape into a different world. They have huge refrigerators stuffed with frozen foods. They have dozens of newspapers and magazines which espouse the same ideals. They have innumerable choices, innumerable gadgets which are all of the same sort and keep them occupied and divert their attention from the real issue — which is the awareness that they could both work less and determine their own needs and satisfactions.”

Without contradiction is Marcuse able to speak about “innumerable choices” and yet point out how we have little to no control over determining what our needs and satisfactions are. This is because of the power producers are able to leverage over consumers, particularly in a capitalist market. It is difficult to say, then, that the individualism of a figure such as Max Stirner, who was fearful of forces such as “society” which functioned far beyond him and outside of him, and sought to claim total control of himself, would approve of such a system which creates consumer desires rather than allowing the consumers themselves to determine their desires. Indeed, Stirner was highly critical of capitalism.

Thirdly, it is crucial now to turn attention to the division of labor which necessarily exists in capitalist society. As Angel Ceja succinctly puts it in *A Zoomer’s Simplified Introduction to Anarcho-Communism* → <https://medium.com/@Eltonthepenguin/a-zoomers-simplified-introduction-to-anarcho-communism-98e03d5ce91c>: “if everyone is an owner, who’s gonna then work for you?” The notion of true and total individual ownership of the means of production is not logically possible; as Ceja writes, “Anyone you ask will tell you that they would rather own a business than work for someone else.” Thus it is an inherent feature of individual ownership of the means of production that this division of labor both exists and subsequently leaves some frustrated at the hands of others. This is not an expression of individualism, but rather the beginning of a class society — which means interests are collectivized, rather than individualized.

The final point to be made concerns the nature of private property as an institution. Ultimately, individual private property in a capitalist market on any substantial scale is fundamentally unsustainable. The boom and bust cycles inherent in its functions and the almost inconceivable fierceness of its competition and drive to endlessly expand profits leaves capitalism unable to keep itself afloat under the crushing nature of its own weight. A government, then, is needed in order to stimulate this economy in times of crisis, regulate it, and ensure it is still running — for the most part — as it should.

What is more is that success in a capitalist market does not entail merely personal achievement, but material social power. This is not just antithetical to the principles of anarchism but also even to capitalism itself. As writer Antisystemic writes in *Looking at some Market Anarchist justifications for exchange* → <https://antisystemic.blogspot.com/2021/12/looking-at-some-market-anarchist.html>: "...capitalists hate free markets and do whatever they can to insulate themselves from competition." The capitalist, with his power, has only the incentive to retain his power through economic control, that is, through curtailing the ability of individuals to engage in private business practices, particularly market-related ones. This leads to systems of power not unlike the state.

How can this be anti-individualist if the individual is still theoretically in his ability to carve his own path and seize his own property? If freedom comes from the individual, how can there be honest concern for a society in which merely certain individuals exercise power over others? The answer is that it may be true that freedom is largely the affair of the individual, but the individual is also inseparable from the society which created him. Thus, an unfree society generally means unfree individuals. Individualism and its freedom are thus largely products of society and not merely concepts which can exist only independently.

It is also important to note how necessary the state is in protecting private property. Without it, each individual will be compelled to create state-like structures of his own to ensure he can retain total control over his supposed claims to property in the market — what Antisystemic calls "semi-monopolies": that is, the ability for an individual to have a total monopoly on certain goods in order to participate in a market; these "semi-monopolies" are on any substantial scale possible only with protection by a state, or something resembling one. At the scale of the monopolist who has succeeded in the market, this means almost total obliteration of individual freedoms.

In *The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy* → <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/decline.html>, Guy Debord remarks on what he calls an “unnatural” nature to private property, concluding that looting was merely a “natural” individual response — a simple reclamation of that freedom and self-ownership which makes us so vigorously human — to those semi-monopolies which exist under capitalism’s system of commodity production:

“Looting is a *natural* response to the unnatural and inhuman society of commodity abundance. It instantly undermines the commodity as such, and it also exposes what the commodity ultimately implies: the army, the police and the other specialized detachments of the state’s monopoly of armed violence. What is a policeman? He is the active servant of the commodity, the man in complete submission to the commodity, whose job it is to ensure that a given product of human labor remains a commodity, with the magical property of having to be paid for, instead of becoming a mere refrigerator or rifle — a passive, inanimate object, subject to anyone who comes along to make use of it.”

How does socialism aim to fix these issues? Socialism demands a world in which individuals can have direct democratic say over how their products are produced, what, and when. It also demands that individuals be given guarantees to livelihood that will allow them the freedom to pursue their personal desires without concern for whether or not it will find favor in the populace. This is not to say socialism has no conception of collectivism; on the contrary, socialism understands how inseparable the individual is from the collective that produced him, and as such understands that individual and collective freedom go hand in hand. Socialism will ask the individual to put in his fair share of work to allow society to flourish, in the same way any society will, but unlike capitalism it will allow him more freedom to express his individuality.

What does the equilibrium between individualism and collectivism look like? The answer lies in that which can chain together individualism as “[the] opportunity to differ, in dis-unity, dis-connection, dis-sent,” [1] and individualism as the embodiment of Malatesta’s “strongest man” who “is the one who is the least isolated; the most independent is the one who has most contacts and friendships and thereby a wider field for choosing his close collaborators...” [2] In my view, this is best described as (1) the state of a well-socialized man who knows his neighbor as himself, knows pleasure and suffering to its innermost capacities, and thus develops his man collectively, and (2) thus allowing him the ability to come into his own, to become master of himself, choose his own path, and all the other beauties that come with individuality. If one of these factors is missing it constitutes a grave injustice to the other.

It is also not difficult to see how allowing more freedom for individuals to express themselves outside of a market would not simply mean the allocating of dead weight which contributes nothing to society but individual satisfaction. Indeed, as was seen in the pre-worker’s state period of the Bolshevik revolution, it in fact leads to an overall flourishing of art and culture. As mentioned before, individuals often adjust their desires to what society offers them. If a market offers them only that which producers deem profitable, you get a population of dull, alienated people consuming dull, alienated media. If a society offers that which so many individuals express their innermost convictions and deepest emotions in, you get a population of passionate, creative people consuming passionate, creative media.

I hope this essay will contribute to the overall discussion regarding the relationship of socialism to individualism. I highly recommend Oscar Wilde’s essay, *The Soul of Man under Socialism* → <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/>, for more on this topic.

[1] Sidney Parker, *Anarchism versus Socialism*

[2] Errico Malatesta, *Mutual Aid: An Essay*

