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Jean Grave
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1903

Translated on 2020 from iiif.lib.harvard.edu (page 58)
This short piece was published on 1903 in the "*Almanach Illustré de la Révolution pour 1904*" [Illustrated Almanac of the Revolution for 1904], which is digitized and available on the [link above](http://theanarchistlibrary.org).

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Individualism and Solidarity

Jean Grave

1903

A few years ago, certain writers took it into their heads to discover Nietzsche, Stirner, and even Schopenhauer. Once on the tracks, they learned that there was, in the world, an individual — the Individual! — that this individual took precedence over everything, had the right to live, to enjoy, to develop in all his entirety, according to his faculties, according to his aptitudes, without having to take into account any hindrance, any obstacle, other than only to break them if they bothered him, or subjugate them if they could be useful to him.

And thus a little anarchy was fabricated which tended to nothing less than to raise a new aristocracy: the intellectual aristocracy, which, like its predecessors, deeply despised the rest of the mass, seeing in it only a herd of good slaves to produce and toil for the "intellectual" who could thus develop and grow in strength, intelligence and beauty!

This conception of the individual, of the intellectual, flattered the vanity of a few failures too well for them not to make themselves its resolute champions. It is too convenient a theory to justify the most contradictory acts, for us not to be endowed with this new school.

The most complete freedom for the individual, his right to the integral satisfaction of all his needs, are absolutely legitimate claims, and there was no need to dig up Nietzsche and Stirner to give them any consecration. This is what man has been looking for since he came into the world, it is this primordial instinct that has made him attempt the various revolutions, even the most political, that he has accomplished along the way. And that is what the communist anarchists have never ceased to demand.

Only, there it is, the communist anarchists, who are not satisfied with words and abstractions, supporters of the scientific method which wants us to rely on facts, were not content to do metaphysics; they studied the conditions of existence of the individual, and without boasting of having made an astonishing discovery—since that is plain to see—they saw that the individual was not a single entity, living in the clouds of dialectics, but a being of flesh and blood, printed in almost two billion copies, and that what was true for one, was also true for each of these two billion.

Moreover, the necessity of living in society cannot be discussed. It is because he has grouped himself with his fellows that man has acquired the faculty of language, and that of expressing his ideas; it was by exchanging his ideas with those of his companions that he succeeded in modifying and enlarging his first impressions, in turning them into traditions that the generations have successively passed on, discussed after having followed them blindly, and of which, from progress to progress, we have constituted the scientific, artistic and literary baggage of today. The man who would like to isolate himself completely from his fellows, would return to the state of a brute, if the better armed species had not destroyed him beforehand.

So here the problem gets complicated. Due to the needs of their organism, and due to the smallness of the space in which they are enclosed, which necessarily limits their field of evolu-

tion, it is no longer enough for individuals to assert their rights; Above all, they must seek the conditions in which they can exercise them, without harm to themselves and without harm to others, which could lead to reprisals and limit the rights that they would assert too brutally.

And from the moment that the individual can only live and develop in society, there are only two ways left for him to assert his freedom: [1] by acting according to his will, if he is strong enough to impose it on others, without worrying about their complaints if he bothers them, or skilled enough at trickery to make them believe that he is acting in this way only in their own interest. Then, no need to claim a social transformation, since bourgeois society provides us with a varied range of these various means and their different combinations. [2] Or else the individuals will agree among themselves to find a social organization which, while bringing them the maximum of well-being, in exchange for the minimum of effort, will allow them to evolve without hindering each other, while preserving, by reciprocal concessions or a perfect adaptation and combination of aptitudes, the greatest possible amount of freedom. That is to say, by an intelligent practice of solidarity.

J. GRAVE.