

# Socialist individualism

**Magnus Marsdal**

*Neoliberalist society just isn't individualistic enough, is it?*

November 30th, 1999. On that morning, I dared to dream. «In Seattle, the authorities have declared a state of emergency. Police have used tear gas against thousands of demonstrators outside the World Trade Organisation's ministerial meeting». In was the 7 o'clock news. But it felt like a spark, flying all the way across the Atlantic and down through my alarm clock radio. It hit me. I was instantly awake. And I had this dream of a world wide awakening from the American dream.

The American dream is that of the individual. The United States never had a strong nobility, no powerful papacy, there never was an "ancien régime" with rigid distinctions of class and estate. The judgements of The market do not distinguish the finest of family names from the most common of John Smiths. The market recognises only plus and minus. Surplus and deficit.

Under neoliberalism, the American dream has generously descended upon men and women in nations all over the world. In it, we are all individuals, and nothing but individuals. It speaks nothing of groups. It knows not of classes in struggle. Each person is just a person, neither more nor less – such is the symbolic source of this universalism's social idyll.

Enchanting as it may be, the painting of American liberty and equality cannot fill the whole canvas. There are other visions. Like the one printed in *The Montgomery Advertiser* on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1956: «We hold these truths to be self evident that all whites are created equal with certain human rights; among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of niggers». Let's go back a couple of months. To that day in December 1955 when Rosa Parks had had enough.

She was 43 years old, and she worked as a seamstress. She took her seat on the Cleveland bus. As always, the bus ride was humiliating. When whites entered, the driver ordered the black passengers to the back of the bus. Everyone obeyed. Except Rosa Parks. She did not argue, she did not speak, but neither did she move. Minutes later, the police arrived at the scene of the hideous crime. Parks was taken into custody and fined.

The overcrowded meeting chaired by black community leaders on the day after Rosa's arrest called on all coloured people to boycott the Montgomery busses. Many depended on the bus for their daily transportation to work, but from day one, the boycott was close to unanimous. Black folks made it to work on foot, in taxis, by private cars and even on donkeys. During the one year long battle that ensued, coloured people did not ride the bus in Montgomery. The authorities and white racists were outraged. They tried everything. From imposing a quadruple rise in taxi fares through legislation, to arresting blacks for «illegal hitch-hiking». They even planted a bomb at the house of local church leader Martin Luther King Jr. But the black community stuck together.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 1956, Montgomery received the verdict of The Supreme Court. The racial segregation was found to be in breach of the Constitution of the United States of America. On the following day, Martin Luther King Jr was the first black person to get onboard a bus in Montgomery. He took a seat at the front.

Rosa Parks sparked the beginning of the civil rights movement, a mass mobilisation which ten years later had forced racial discrimination out of the U.S. code of law. Rosa Parks was one brave individual. What was it that she stood up for, as she sat firm on her seat, that morning, on the bus in Alabama? Parks expressed herself in these words: "It was very humiliating having to suffer the indignity of riding segregated buses twice a day, five days a week, to go downtown and work for white people". Parks stood up for the dignity of the individual. She demanded the right to be treated with respect, to live in society as an individual equal to other individuals. Rosa Parks stood up for individualism. And the whole African-American community stood up along with her.

At present, individualism belongs to the political right. It is seen as linked with capitalism, selfishness and liberalist economical policies. Individualism looks like the antithesis of any notion of solidarity,

common interests and collective struggle. It is the opposite of what many believe the political left should adhere to: collectivism.

Such was the hegemonic mode of political thought throughout Western cultures in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It operated on a bipolar ideological scheme with individualist Liberty at the right end of the axis and collectivist Equality out to the left.

## **SOCIALISM**

+ EQUALITY  
- LIBERTY

## **CAPITALISM**

- EQUALITY  
+ LIBERTY

Collectivism to the left, individualism to the right. You know the axis. But can you place yourself on it? Where do we fit the *collective* struggle for *individual* freedom waged by Rosa Parks and her people? And what is individualism, anyway?

In our recent (Norwegian) book “Third Left – For a Radical Individualism”, Bendik Wold and I use “individualism” as a label for some value-laden aspirations which have made wide breakthroughs in Western cultures over the last centuries. We highlight three.

Individualism strives for:

1. The respect for the *dignity* of the individual.
2. The *independence* of the individual.
3. The individual's *self-development*.

If this is individualism, then can it belong exclusively to the political right? How, in that case, could the American socialist leader Daniel De Leon, in a heated public debate in April of 1912, point his finger at his opponent, New York's Attorney General Thomas F. Carmody, and boldly state that “We charge capitalism with being the destroyer of individualism!”?

We believe De Leon's accusation resonates well with the line of thought developed by the most radical of the Enlightenment philosophers – Jean-Jaques Rousseau. Rousseau held individual liberty to be the greatest good of all and the proper aim for any legal system. But by liberty's side, and equal to it, Rousseau placed equality, “because liberty cannot exist without it.”

The dawning bourgeois society in metropolitan Paris which Rousseau observed around himself displayed inequalities more glaring than anywhere in the world. Bourgeois *juridical* equality was a good thing, indeed, Rousseau reasoned, but it was in no way sufficient for the requirements of a moral society. Not as long as the stark *economical* inequalities continued to exist, he argued. This state of affairs was a “social contract” designed by the rich man to his own benefit. It had “eternally fixed the law of property and inequality, converted clever usurpation into unalterable right”. The bourgeois social contract “bound new fetters on the poor, and gave new powers to the rich”.

In Rousseau's view, large economical inequalities was incompatible with individual liberty. Inequality creates economical dependence. Under inequality, one man must sell himself to another, in order to survive. The rich can exploit the poor for their own purposes. The liberty of the poor vanishes. The unequal society becomes one of unfreedom, based on dependence and exploitation, a society of strong antagonisms.

Therefore: In order for Liberty to thrive, it is “most necessary” for the state, “above all, to protect the poor from the tyranny of the rich”, “not by building hospitals for the poor, but by securing all citizens against poverty” and “by depriving all men of the means to accumulate wealth”, Rousseau says. Individual liberty requires that society has “neither rich men nor beggars”. For Rousseau, liberty and equality belong together. Not as opposites, but because they create each other.

This radical-democratic individualism was pursued further by Karl Marx. Contrary to the popular image of Marx as the inventor of a communist religion hostile to any and all forms of individualism, Marx's problem with capitalism was *not* the bourgeois ideals of liberty, democracy and individuality. His indictment was the fact that this class-divided social order was becoming the primary *obstacle* to the actual, factual realisation of those ideals. Marx' aim was nothing less individualistic than the development of “the free individuality of the workers”. The focus of his critique was on “the contradiction between *the individuality* of each separate proletarian and labour, the condition of life forced upon him” (emphasis added). And the way forwards that Marx envisioned, was the political mobilisation of workers themselves for a full democratisation of the management of society's vital resources – the “means of production”.

Given our definition of individualism, is it fair to say that Marx was an ardent individualist? Yes. “The attraction of communism to him was that it would make it possible for each and every human being, and not just a minor elite, to fulfil oneself. [...]Marx was an individualist in this normative sense”,

writes Columbia professor Jon Elster.

Today, this revolutionary individualism is a well-kept ideological secret. But we find the same sentiments in Oscar Wilde. This dandy socialist argued that socialism “will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism”. Around the same time, French socialist leader Jean Jaurés propagated that “socialism is the logical consummation of individualism”. And on the night of that heated debate in New York City in 1912, Daniel De Leon declared that “We of the socialist movement hold that we are the real promoters of individualism, or individuality, in the country. [...] We charge modern society, that is, capitalism, with crushing out individuality”.

De Leon’s words fell in the midst of a raging ideological battle: Who was the true champion of individualism? Would the right forces or the left forces gain the privilege of carrying its banner through the 20<sup>th</sup> century? In the right camp, individualism was seen as an ideology celebrating an all American capitalism and the fireworks of freedom brought by it’s bourgeois democracy. For the left camp, the aspirations of individualism spawned a biting moral and social critique of the capitalist system and strengthened their case for revolutionary transformation. Then came the revolution of 1917. Much would soon be changed.

With the consolidation of the Soviet Union as a monopoly-bureaucratic dictatorship towards the 1930s, the Kremlin established itself as the global authority of «marxism-leninism». The reinvented Karl Marx of Stalinism was assigned the unrewarding task of defending a state with no genuine freedom of speech, no freedom of assembly, without independent trade unions and without individual legal security. This state, according to the Kremlin, was socialism.

On this one particular issue, Josef Stalin was made (for some reason or another ...) an authorised source within Western political science. Thenceforth developed a mind-numbing ideological consensus, in which socialism was defined as “the collectivist subjection of the individuals under the state”. Upon that definition both communist, bourgeois and social-democratic regimes could agree. It was in the interest of all three that socialism be defined in this way.

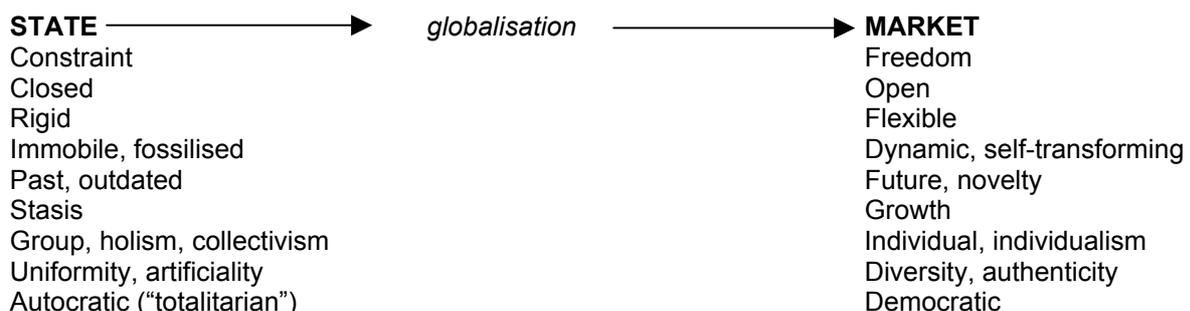
On the basis of this peculiar Bourgeois-Stalinist alliance on the ideological battlefield, one was able to establish the bipolar scheme that came to dominate political thought throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Behold: The Scheme of Liberalism!



Socialism is perceived as a power monopoly of the state in all realms of society, the welfare state as paternalistic regulation and interference, while market liberalism is equivalent to the right to life, liberty and unrestrained pursuit of happiness. Within this mental framework, it is admitted that neoliberalism represent a shift away from equality. But there’s a valuable upside: Neoliberalism is also seen as a shift towards enhanced individual liberty.

This has a lot to do with the emergence of neoliberalism (and “The Third Way”). The Scheme of Liberalism was a favourable ideological environment for the subsequent imposition of what Pierre Bourdieu called “the elementary forms of neoliberal thought”. The following dichotomies are part and parcel of the great ideological and economic restoration that began in the wake of declining rates of American profit around 1968.

**Elementary forms of neoliberal thought:**



On the basis of this interpretation of 20<sup>th</sup> century history, the neoliberalists have been able to promote their global onslaught on welfare and trade unions as “progress” and “liberation”. That narrative has proven extremely powerful. But there’s more than neoliberalism to the ideological hegemony of the day.

“What is The Matrix”, we ask in our book. Meaning: What world views have come to replace the matrix once established by an advancing labour movement, namely that of “class”? An answer might begin with the construction of the Trinity of bourgeois individualism:

1. Neoliberalism – efficacious among the economical and political elite.
2. “Postmodernism” – efficacious among the intellectual elite.
3. The entertainment industry – efficacious among the whole populace.

Taken together, these are discourses with the ability to format perceptions of the world and self from the top to the bottom of society. This Trinity contributes to the consolidation of bourgeois individualism by way of three different and independent constructions of the self-sufficient individual:

1. The economic theory of neoliberalism constructs man as *homo oeconomicus*; the utility-maximising atom individual who inhabits the theoretical models of neoclassical economics.
2. Much of so-called postmodernist cultural theory (de)constructs a human being liberated from class, nationality and other social identities. Then, it often throws in a youthful celebration of the liberating effects associated with commodity consumption. This postmodernism’s Individual is the playful and impulsive cousin of *homo oeconomicus*.
3. Advertisers and the entertainment industry constructs their audience not as citizens, but as consumer individuals. Such individuals find their fortune, misfortune and meaning of life within the horizon of goods, services and entertainment on the capitalist market.

The ideological effects of this Trinity gives to bourgeois individualism a defining power that is quite overwhelming. For example as seen in the elementary forms of (Americanised) “postmodern” thought:

#### Elementary forms of (Americanised) “postmodern” thought:



We see how this world view fits quite well with the dichotomies of neoliberalism ... Taken together, the discourses of Trinity paint this picture of Western capitalism:

*“All individuals are free. We are free as consumers. We are free as voters. We are free to buy and sell on the labour market. By virtue of these freedoms we have democracy. The larger the production of goods, services and symbols, the larger the amount of happiness. The more we deregulate, the more production – and thereby greater happiness. We shape our own lives. We are no longer bound by narrow traditions and simple-minded ideologies. We are all individuals, and nothing but individuals.”*

One encounters the same world view everywhere. Attitudes among economists, politicians, advertising gurus, cultural commentators and the man in the street all confirm each other. They are shaped by *The American Ideology* diffused to so many quarters in so many countries through neoliberalism, “postmodernism” and the entertainment industries towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



