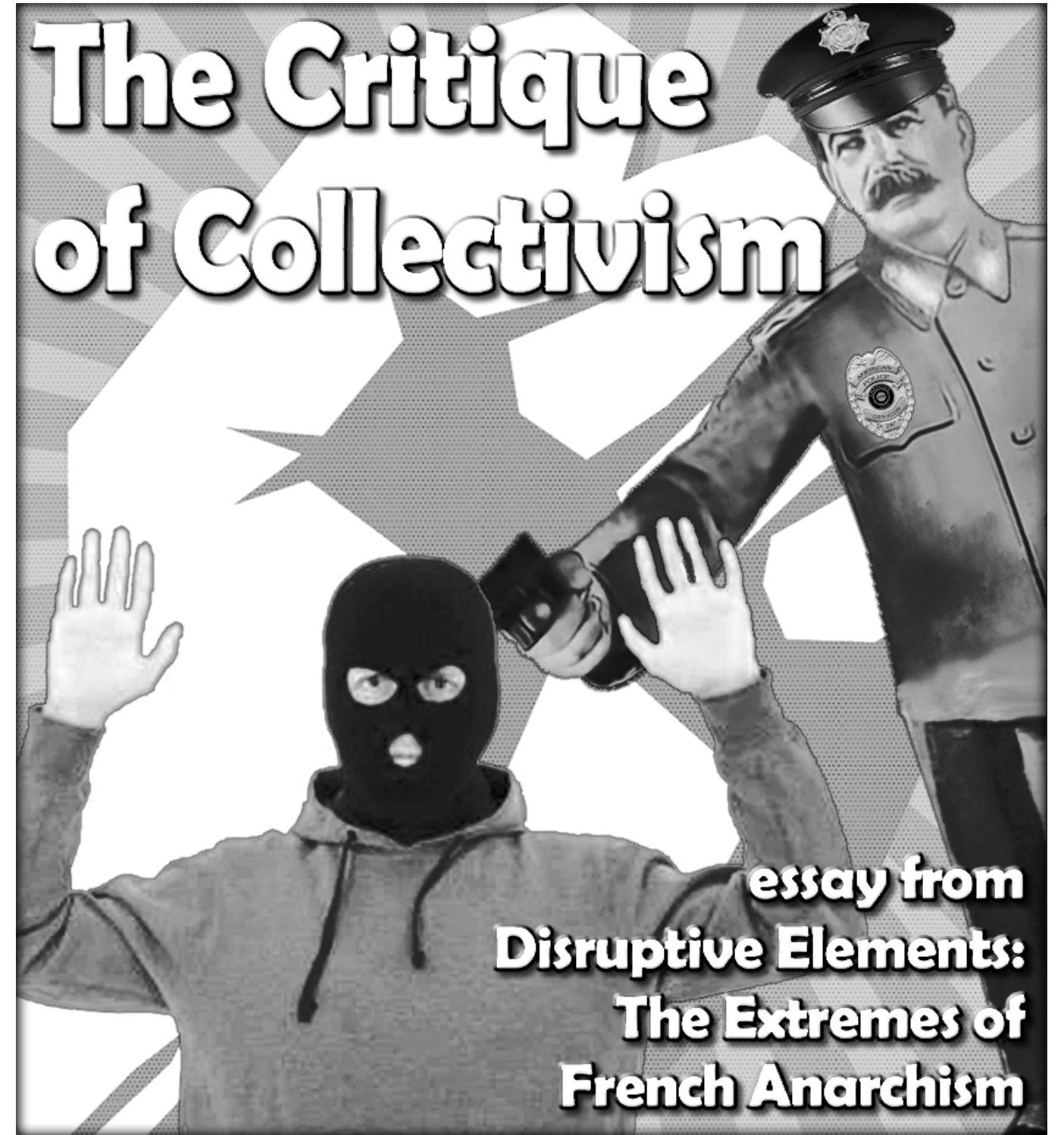


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The Critique of Collectivism



essay from
**Disruptive Elements:
The Extremes of
French Anarchism**

I am an anarchist, a political and social Huguenot; I deny everything and affirm naught but myself: because the sole truth of which I have material and moral proof and tangible, comprehensible and intelligible evidence, the only real, startling, non-arbitrary truth not susceptible to interpretation, is myself I am. There I have a positive fact. Everything else is abstraction and, in mathematics, would be designated as x, an unknown quantity; and I need not trouble myself with it. In essence, society consists of a vast combination of material and personal interests. The collective or State interest -by virtue of which dogma, philosophy and politics together have thus far demanded wholesale or partial forswearing of individuals and their assets -is a sheer figment which, in its priestly garb, has furnished the basis for the fortunes of all the clergy, from Aaron right up to Monsieur Bonaparte. This imagined interest has no existence outside of legislation. It has assuredly never been the case, never will be the case and cannot be the case that upon this earth there exists an interest higher than mine, an interest to which I am obliged to make even a partial sacrifice of my interest. On which grounds I am correct in saying that the only social fact is the natural fact, the individual, the self.

— Anselme Bellegarrigue, 1850

The manifest tendency in political and social thought is in the direction of collectivism: that is, the divination of society and the authority of the social body, unified under some homogenous ideological banner or administrative absolutism. The essence of Collectivism is quantitative agglomeration and the term is most useful when it's applied to a social-political aggregate embodying all, or at least the majority, in an interdependent network of social roles (voluntarily embraced or otherwise), a network that suggests an illusory unanimity and singleness of purpose. Collectivists are social planners who fasten a transcendental importance to the word "everyone" and who strive to apply a standard of political design and framed symmetry to organized society through the imposition of their preferred uniform system — for "everyone"! Every collectivist thinker, whether Marxist, Socialist, Muslim or Syndicalist, views society as a totality — as a political unit — that needs to be constituted in a strictly organized, coordinated and regularized fashion, and only disagree on what definite shape and form their fancied systems will assume (invariably, they all propose conditions where society and the State, for all intents and purposes, become one and the same). These amateur social scientists are like amateur physicians: They always begin with the question of remedies, and prescribe broad and general theories of wide application without any clear conception of the anatomy and physiology of their central obsession: "society". Civilization's pestilential supply of reformers, sociologists, humanitarians, utopian moralists and would-be managers-in-general of society never have any doubt regarding the efficacy of their remedies and it never troubles them that their Grand Plan to cure all the ills of the human race with one master equation necessitates a complete reconstruction of other peoples worlds — and even a remodeling of human nature! For once the socializers have settled all questions a priori in a thorough-going blueprint, they start plotting, blundering, and murdering their way towards their ideal social order — which, needless to say, will allow of no secession, no splits, and no independent or semi-independent existence to function within its territorial jurisdiction.

The fallacies of collectivist thinking are endless, but the largest problem, which collectivists always abstain from directly addressing, is the very largeness of their schemes (the emphasis on size and the reverence for quantity are typical collectivist traits). For example, though Communism or Socialism might be possible (and even enjoyable) as an intentional communal

more prominent components of the French anarchist movement also spoke of going to war for the profit of the bourgeois state! Kropotkin, his aide de camp Jean Grave, and Tcherkesoff were among the most eager defenders of France: "Don't let these heinous conquerors wipe out the Latin civilization and the French people again... Don't let them impose on Europe a century of militarism" (Letter of Kropotkin to J. Grave, September 2, 1914). It was in the name of the defense of democracy against Prussian militarism that they supported the Sacred Union: "German aggression was a threat — executed — not only against our hopes for emancipation but against all human evolution.

That's why we, anarchists, we, anti-militarists, we enemies of war, we passionate partisans for peace and fraternity between peoples, we line up on the side of the resistance and we have not thought of separating our fate from that of the rest of the population" (Manifesto of the Sixteen, February 1916).

In France, the anarcho-syndicalist CGT also threw into the bin its own resolutions that called on it organize the general strike in case of war, transforming itself into a hysterical purveyor of cannon fodder for imperialist butchery: " against the force of arms, against Germanic militarism, we must save the democratic and revolutionary tradition of France," "go without regret comrade workers when you are called to the frontiers to defend French soil." (La Bataille Syndicaliste, organ of the CNT, August 1914). Overnight, the mass-oriented anarchists (who viewed anarchism as a means of directing society) became part of what Albert Libertad contemptuously referred to as the "patriotic herd", while the individualist anarchists managed to retain their sanity and resist absorption by the war machine (the record of American radicals during that war was, on the whole, far more principled and courageous than that of their European counterparts; the actions of the IWW and the American anarchists, notably Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, stood in sharp contrast to the spineless capitulation and geriatric confusion of Kropotkin and Benjamin Tucker).

The writings in this next section challenge the collectivist psychosis and put the spotlight on anarchist pathfinders who scrutinized collectivism as an instrument for the subjection and taming of the sovereign individual — and of liberty itself. We kick off the fireworks with Andre Lorulot's superb "Individualism and The Social Question", a fluid, tentative investigation into an anarchist position on Society. Next, Manuel Devaldes subjects collectivism (and its attendant power relationships) to a rigorous appraisal in his lengthy "Reflections on Individualism". In another essay, E. Bertran lays to rest the collectivist fables of the French Revolution, while Paraf-Javal deconstructs democracy (as a form of collectivism) with a theoretical intensity in "The Absurdity of Politics". And finally, we end this section with Andre Lorulot's biting, misanthropic diatribe "Men Disgust Me". Anarchist theory has manifested an inertia and loss of energy in recent years and could use some fresh stimuli to reanimate the faltering pulse of its activities; we're making these older social musings available again to a new readership because we feel that it's these dynamic negations of retrograde Mass-ideals that have the potential, in the end, to move the anarchist "movement" — or at least that part of it worth moving — and that preserve the remaining vitality of anarchist thought and herald the beginning of its rebirth, released from the shackles of global and collectivist chicanery. Enjoy and evolve!

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Mercifully, France also generated plenty of anarchists who opposed all herd-ethics, herd-concepts, and herd-murder sprees (like World War One), and who preferred dynamic chaos to the standardized stagnation and sterile conformity of bee-hive Socialism, Communism, and Capitalism (three systems that are one at bottom: three systems that aim at the absorption of the body, blood and life of the individual). The misleading collectivist adage “safety in numbers” is more intelligently translated as danger in numbers by the free spirits and unallied minds who rejoice in the grandeur of the individual against the Mass (be it Public Opinion, Society, or State) — and the periodic murderous rampages of the Mass. While social anarchists narcotize themselves with fatuous dreams of the impossible, individualist anarchists live remote from the practice of politics (with all its contagious allurements) and, consequently, have a more objective perspective on the hierarchical and authoritarian defects of party organization, large-scale social planning, and “majority rule”, i.e., democracy.

French anarchists like Zo d’Axa, Libertad, Emile Armand and Pierre Chardon continually argued that a majority has no more right than a king to control the acts of any individual, and that the only real right in either case is that of might. Therefore, all laws (whether common or statute) arise out of force alone — and the power that a group might have to enforce their definitions and their penalties. Influenced by Stirner’s union of egoists, French individualist anarchists rejected forced collectivism and posited interindividual cooperation between self-determined beings that enter at their own risk, and of their own free accord, into voluntary combination with other equally self-willed, deliberately acting, individuals. This is no community or society in the usual sense of the words, but will more closely resemble ad hoc alliances formed for mutual advantage by resolute, intelligent rebels. Such voluntary alliances are not universally social and do not seek to encompass all and everybody; they are limited regarding their size and magnitude and the individuals cooperating within these loose unions don’t thereby form an organic whole (in other words, they don’t constitute a unit that absorbs its constituent parts to the complete annihilation of their separate existences in the given purpose or process).

These alliances are an open-ended concept and not a projection of a future social organization; they can and do exist now on a smaller scale, whenever individuals gather to accomplish something that requires their combined efforts. And as they are always temporary, they don’t demand the eternal loyalty or allegiance of the individuals involved, nor do they attempt to impose an abstract ideal of equality upon human beings who are unique, ever-changing and outside all formulas and patterns.

Of course, the guardians of the anarchist status quo scented a menace in these ideas (which were skeptical towards Kropotkin-esque schemes of social amelioration and the equalitarian virtues they’re based on) and tried, in one way or another, and by the usual insidious methods, to block the propagation and general discussion of them, leading to one of the major bifurcations in the movement — one which became only more pronounced with the outbreak of World War One. The First World War spawned the disgraceful phenomenon of pro-war former radicals supporting the government when it’s at its most repressive and vicious (during wartime!), and rationalizing this departure from principle, at least to their own satisfaction, on the grounds that the working class, and particularly the organized workers, had accepted the war with great docility, and therefore, the “historical conditions” were not yet right for revolution (once the danger of a German-dominated world had been averted, they maintained, it would be safe for radicals to return to their traditional opposition to the status quo). That socialists, communists and other statists would take this position is not so shocking, but amazingly, the

experiment, it becomes quite another question when it’s a case of forcibly applying it to millions and millions of people, who share neither the same “internationalist” vision (programmed towards ultimate merging and globally), nor the same interests or desires, nor the same ideas on life. Collectivism on that scale implies coerced egalitarianism, as an ideal mass is homogenous and consists therefore of “equal” atoms, but such a purely theoretical, contrived equality also presupposes imposition on account of its extreme unnaturalness (brutal force is not only necessary for the “leveling” process in the initial stage — it becomes mandatory as a permanent feature in order to maintain the abstract and inorganic “symmetrical order”). More to the point, the establishment of such all-embracing “equality” requires a complicated technocratic police-state infrastructure and demands an endless number of laws, regulations, restrictions, and controls which in turn comprise a pagoda of slavery, of quasi-military rule, of constant social supervision and peremptory institutional regimentation that feeds, nourishes, and allegedly “protects” the subject population. Collectivist ideology finds fertile ground in the minds of those who lack in self-assertion and are deficient in ego-consciousness, i.e., those who feel a need for personal anchorage to some system of group identity and who view other humans as primarily members of one herd or another (a nation, a class, a society, etc.), believing that individuals are only complete when coupled to a huge organized structure where the particular is defined by the whole. These mass-minded weaklings know that their real strength doesn’t lie in their own personalities but in their numbers, for numbers indicate social authority and certitude. The collectivist’s insatiable need for company, for fraternity, for brotherhood, is reflective of agonizing personal insecurities, but is positively degrading and undignified to. an anarchist, whose outlook starts with the “I” and not the “We”, and who understands that there is no common denominator for all individuals (the fiction on which all collectivists rest their case). In fact, this is one of the main characteristics which sets anarchism apart from politics in general, but more specifically, from Leftism, and from the leftist rackets and organizations which are at the service of today’s or tomorrow’s rulers. Of course, there’s always been branches of anarchist thought that have stressed the utterly erroneous notion of social solidarity and that have assumed to speak for some vast, vaguely-defined constituency called “The People” (the typical representatives being the anemic writings of Kropotkin and Jean Crave), but these sentimental, wish-fulfilling fantasies are really only faltering steps towards the end goal of complete personal liberty, whereas the most radical demands put forth by individualist-anarchists imply the destruction of the very foundations of every possible “social” position, and are absolutely incapable of being used by collectivist planners.

The anarchist critique of collectivism inevitably morphs into a piercing critique of capital R revolution, predicated as such events are on collective, unified participation and end goals. From the French Revolution on, anarchists in France have witnessed all successful upheavals result in the creation of new despotisms with new privileged classes at the helm. This is because the breakdown of one particular governmental structure isn’t normally accompanied by a collective mad dash for freedom, but by a panicked search for security through the re-imposition of hierarchy and leadership — a process which enables the most ruthless and the most cunning among the underprivileged to rise to the top as either partners or successors of the old elites, thus perpetuating the immemorial master-and-servant pattern of civilized society. French history is chock-full of old-time revolutionaries who tasted the poisonous fruit of government and disgracefully turned into either common politicians or totalitarian tyrants. It’s very popular to pose as a “friend of humanity,” or a “friend of the working classes,” but the chief difference between self-styled revolutionaries and overt Empire-builders like Napoleon

seems to consist mainly in the verbiage with which they clothe their similar ambitions (the revolutionaries generally take a leaf from Judeo-Christian faux humanitarianism and pretend that their aim is the liberation of all humanity). After a revolutionary victory is won and the former ruling class ousted, the new class positions are fortified and a new master class, as a matter of course, will be restored; only now they'll be based on new foundations and more solidly and unshakably entrenched, differently explained and justified by new reasons — even sanctified by the same individuals who condemned these arrangements in their old shape. Thus the rebels of one age become the reactionaries of the next and the obsequious masses go along with the program — little suspecting that a yoke is being kept ready for them by their new masters who appear now (as do all master-classes in the beginning) in the shape of comrades, friends, rescuers, altruists, fighters for justice, but who will inevitably unmask, strip themselves of shammed benevolence, feigned care, simulated humaneness, and reveal their true face and genuine character of ruthlessly exacting masters. And the poor saps who put their lives on the line to install this new regime — sincerely believing that meaningful change was taking place — are left to fume and fret over having been deceived. They were promised comforts, an easy life, a super-abundance, an over-flowing of goods and luxuries, and now all they're offered are crumbs shaken spitefully from the over-laden table at which the new lords are feasting. The first period of the "revolution" consisted of the organizers enlisting the jacquerie with hot-air pledges in order to forge them into the crew of wreckers whose task it was to smash up the existing social order — for the profit of the organizers. The second phase, following upon the first, is a time of hierarchical reconstruction, a time of erecting palaces and slums, temples and shacks, a time of harnessing the masses with new collars placed upon their unwieldy necks — for they're no longer of any use, but are now rather a hindrance, a disruption to the new governing structure.

Here we're discussing the position that the idealists of the revolutionary cause (the true believers) always find themselves in. But what of the beloved People themselves? History has shown clearly that the poor are just as vicious, reactionary in outlook, and contemptible as the rich; that they gleefully embrace the most xenophobic, freedom-negating slogans of their masters, or of their masters' power-hungry rivals, and that, as a rule, they're more prone to pounce upon their equally poor or even poorer "fellow-workers" who are of a different skin color, language or belief than upon the commanding class. The emotionally-suggestible masses have all been marked (as children, and over the course of centuries) by the official stamp of authoritarian society: Consequently, they reason like sheep, the feeling of liberty has been effectively obliterated in them and they're ripe for all kinds of subservience — doomed to serve as a pedestal for the ever renascent privileged elite of either power-seeking upstarts or long-term beneficiaries of inherited wealth and position. Dumbly they obey the dictates of their tyrannous lords, generally without rebellion or protest, filled with a vague, illimitable weariness such as the dead must know, their "thinking" always just staggering along — and any short-lived revolt that they might engage in is usually followed by a gray, ceaseless longing to return to their interrupted slumber. The "people" are not easily stirred and their congenital incompetence throughout the domains of political life is almost universal (and furnishes their rulers with a practical, managerial justification for rulership). The "people" are that vast, inert majority of human beings in all ages and all countries who follow the patterns in which they were born and carefully avoid acting or thinking originally, in order not to destroy the terrifying mediocrity to which they're so instinctively devoted — their incentive and enthusiasm snuffed out at an early age and replaced with a kind of deadening torpor and dull-witted cowardice (making their lives as artificial and as useless as civilization).

Like true herd animals they comply scrupulously with the written and unwritten commands of the group and move cautiously in the broad stream of the mediocre masses, avoiding all extremes except those in a frenzied mass hysteria (in those moments, citizen lambda not only rejoices in marching amongst fifty thousand uniformly clad soldiers, all stepping rhythmically in one direction, but finds an almost equal gratification in contemplating the show from a couch). The exploited outnumber their exploiters in our own times, and the same outnumbering has existed in every historical epoch, but for some baffling reason the "people" have never gained the upper hand for any considerable length of time. If everyone is so freedom-loving and "really" wants an anarchist society, then why haven't we got one by now? Why do we have politicians and a State apparatus after well over a century of anarchist propaganda? If everyone's real interest is in free, cooperative living (as social anarchists like to claim), then who are all these people that staff institutions like prisons, collection agencies, courts and congresses? Might there, instead, be some unpleasant truths contained in Etienne De La Boetie's Discourse on Voluntary Servitude? If contemporary anarchists insist on continuing to use phrases like "social revolution", then it should at least be admitted that such an event will not be a class or proletarian phenomenon, but will be brought about by groups of determined individuals, who will invariably be drawn from different classes and social contexts.

Collectivist-anarchist visions, such as those preached by Kropotkin, Jean Grave and Sebastien Fuare — and accepted by their unsophisticated following — express an ideal of a perfect, harmonious social system that will do away with compulsion and domination, but this ideal (like all others) is a mirage. All the sermonizing and high-sounding oratorical exercises of these evangelical crusaders obscure the fact that new and larger possibilities for exploitation and control open up with greater social collectivization, which would only result in the magnification and colossalization of the global administrative machine that's already crushing us under its wheels. In its most extreme form, as statist communism, every collectivist utopia on record has been ushered in by the secret police in conjunction with the firing squad — and to believe that the "anarcho"-communists could pull it off differently through a campaign of "educating" the masses is to babble nonsense. Empty phrases about "voluntary federations of perpetual barricades" and "democratic councils of the revolutionary commune" have dominated opinion in anarchist circles since the word was coined, yet in essence convey nothing but an ultra-humane form of leftism which should be recognized as such (if emancipation consists of no rule, rule by councils is not emancipatory; anarchy is not democracy insofar as it disallows any form of government). These collectivist fictions have been the dead tissue on living anarchist thought and praxis since Proudhon and it would seem wise to abandon this sentimental reverence for The People and other make-believe stupidities, and arrive instead at a consciousness of your own individuality. The People is just one more half-baked, hollow entity, like God, Society, the State, Vice, Morality — and though this last idol will probably take longer and be harder to break for anarchists than the others, it is still only an idol and needs to be smashed.

Once and for all, my friend, understand that I am the irreconcilable enemy of all government, whatever it may be. I've spent my whole life thinking about this problem, and I feel that there are no circumstances which justify one in sacrificing his liberty to his fellows. Any law, whether it commands or forbids, proclaimed with a view to the so-called interest of the group, to the detriment of the individual, is a fraud.

— Kaw-djer, The Masterless Man