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The Rehabilitation of Anarchism

Daniel Guérin

1965

Anarchism has long been a victim of an undeserved discredit, of an injustice that has manifested itself in three ways.

First, its defamers insist that anarchism is dead, that it has not resisted the great revolutionary tests of our time: the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Revolution. That it no longer has a place in the modern world, characterized as this is by centralization, large-scale political and economic units, and the totalitarian concept. All that is left to the anarchists, as Victor Serge said, is, “by the force of events to go over to revolutionary Marxism.”¹

Second, its detractors, in order to better discredit it, propose an absolutely tendentious vision of its doctrine. Anarchism is said to be essentially individualist, particularist, and resistant to any form of organization. It aims at fracturing and atomizing, at the retreat into themselves of local units of administration and production. It is said to be incapable of unity, centralization, and planning. It’s nostalgic for “the Golden Age.” It aims

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Chapter from *For a Libertarian Communism*

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¹ Serge’s preface to Joaquin Maurin, *Révolution et Contre-Révolution en*

for the reviving of outmoded forms of society. It sins by a childish optimism; its “idealism” fails to take into account the solid reality of the material infrastructure.

Finally, certain commentators are interested solely in wresting from oblivion and publicizing only its most controversial deviations, like individual assassinations and propaganda by the deed.

In revisiting the question I’m not simply trying to retrospectively repair a triple injustice or trying to write a work of erudition. It seems to me, in fact, that anarchism’s constructive ideas are still alive; that they can, on condition they be reexamined and closely scrutinized, assist contemporary socialist thought in making a new start.

Nineteenth-century anarchism is clearly distinguishable from twentieth-century anarchism. Nineteenth-century anarchism was essentially doctrinal. Though Proudhon had played a more or less central role in the revolution of 1848, and the disciples of Bakunin were not totally foreign to the Paris Commune, these two nineteenth-century revolutions in their essence were not libertarian revolutions, but to a certain extent rather “Jacobin” revolutions. On the contrary, the twentieth century is, for the anarchists, one of revolutionary practice. They played an active role in the two Russian Revolutions and, even more, in the Spanish Revolution.

The study of the authentic anarchist doctrine, as it was formed in the nineteenth century, shows that anarchy is neither disorganization, disorder, nor atomization, but the search for true organization, true unity, true order, and true centralization, which can only reside, not in authority, coercion, or compulsion exercised from the top down, but in free, spontaneous, federalist association from the bottom up. As for the study of the Russian and Spanish revolutions and the role played in them by the anarchists, it shows that contrary

Espagne (Rieder, 1937).

to the false legend believed by some, these great and tragic experiences show that libertarian socialism was largely in the right against the socialism I'll call "authoritarian." Throughout the world, socialist thought over the course of the fifty years that followed the Russian Revolution, of the thirty years that followed the Spanish Revolution, has remained obsessed with a caricature of Marxism, bursting with its dogmas. In particular, the internecine quarrel between Trotsky and Stalin, which is the one best known to the advanced reader, if it contributed to wresting Marxism-Leninism from a sterilizing conformism, did not truly cast complete light on the Russian Revolution, because it did not address—could not address—the heart of the problem.

For Voline, anarchist historian of the Russian Revolution, to speak of a "betrayal" of the revolution, as Trotsky does, is insufficient as an explanation: "How was that betrayal possible in the aftermath of so beautiful and total a revolutionary victory? This is the real question ... What Trotsky calls betrayal was, in fact, the ineluctable effect of a slow degeneration due to incorrect methods ... It was the degeneration of the revolution ... that led to Stalin, and not Stalin who caused the revolution to degenerate." Voline asks: "Could Trotsky really 'explain' the drama since, along with Lenin, he himself contributed to the disarming of the masses."⁽¹⁾

The assertion of the late, lamented Isaac Deutscher, according to which the Trotsky-Stalin controversy would "continue and reverberate for the rest of the century" is debatable.² The debate that should be reopened and continued is perhaps less

² See Deutscher's biography of Trotsky, *The Prophet Armed*, *The Prophet Unarmed* and *The Prophet Outcast* (first published 1954–63).

⁽¹⁾ See Voline's *The Unknown Revolution, 1917–1921* (Book 2, Part V, Ch. 7), first published in French in 1947. Voline was the pseudonym of Vsevolod Mikhailovich Eikhenbaum (1882–1945), a prominent Russian anarchist who took part in both the Russian and Ukrainian revolutions before being forced into exile by the Bolsheviks. [DB]

that between Lenin's successors, which is already outdated, but rather that between authoritarian socialism and libertarian socialism. In recent time anarchism has come out of the shadow to which it was relegated by its enemies.

Materials for a fresh examination of anarchism are today available to those who are impassioned about social emancipation and in search of its most effective forms. And also, perhaps, the materials for a synthesis, one both possible and necessary, between the two equally fertile schools of thought: that of Marx and Engels and that of Proudhon and Bakunin. Ideas, it should be said, contemporary in their flowering and less distant from each other than might be thought. Errico Malatesta, the great Italian anarchist, observed that all the anarchist literature of the nineteenth century "was impregnated with Marxism."³ And in the other direction, the ideas of Proudhon and Bakunin contributed in no small degree to enriching Marxism.

³ Malatesta, polemic of 1897 quoted by Luigi Fabbri, *Dittoturæ Rivoluzione* (1921).