

Socialism In Danger — Preface

Elisée Reclus

1894

The work of our friend, Domela Nieuwenhuis, is the result of patient studies and personal experiences very profoundly lived; four years were spent writing this work. In a time like ours, in which events go by quickly, in which the fast succession of facts makes harder and harder the critique of ideas, four years is already a long time, and certainly, during this period, the author has been able to observe many changes in society, and his own spirit went through an evolution. The three parts of the work, published at various long intervals in *La Société Nouvelle*, testify of the steps traversed. Firstly, the writer studies the “various tendencies of Social Democracy in Germany”; then, terrified by the retreat of the revolutionary spirit which he has recognized in German socialism, he asks himself whether socialist development is not in danger of being confused with the innocuous demands of the liberal bourgeoisie; finally, resuming the study of the manifestations of social thought, he notes that there is no reason to worry, and that the regression of a school, in which one deals more with commanding and disciplining than with thinking and doing, is very largely compensated by the growth of libertarian socialism, where fellow workers, without dictators, without enslavement to a book or to a collection of formulas, work together to build a society of equals.

The documents cited in this book are of great historical importance. Under the thousand appearances of official policy — formulas of diplomats, Russian visits, French genuflections, toasts of emperors, recitations of verses and decorations of servants, — appearances which one is often naive enough to take for history, happens the great thrust of proletarians emerging from the consciousness of their condition, with the firm resolution to make themselves free, and preparing to change the axis of social life by the conquest for all of a well-being which is still the privilege of some. This deep movement is the real story, and our descendants will be happy to know the twists and turns of the struggle from which their freedom was born!

They will learn how difficult was intellectual and moral progress in our century which consists in “curing individuals.” Certainly, a man can render great services to his contemporaries by the energy of his thought, the power of his action, the intensity of his devotion, but, after having done his work, he should not pretend have become a god, and especially that, in spite of himself, we do not consider him as such! It would be to want the good done by the individual to turn into evil in the name of the idol. Every man weakens one day after having struggled, and how many of us give in to fatigue, or else to the solicitations of vanity, to the snares laid by perfidious friends! And even if the wrestler had remained valiant and pure until the end, some will lend

him a language which isn't his, and even the words he spoke will be used by diverting them from their true meaning.

So see how was treated this powerful individuality, Marx, in whose honor, hundreds of thousands fanaticized, raise their arms to heaven, promising to religiously observe his doctrine! A whole party, a whole army with several dozen deputies in the Germanic Parliament, do they not now interpret this Marxist doctrine precisely in a sense contrary to the thought of the master? He declared that economic power determines the political form of societies, and it is now argued in his name that economic power will depend on a party majority in political assemblies. He proclaimed that "the state, in order to abolish pauperism, must abolish itself, for the essence of evil lies in the very existence of the state!" And we devote ourselves to his shadow to conquer and rule the state! Certainly, if Marx's political ideas are to triumph, it will be, like the religion of Christ, on condition that the master, adored in appearance, is denied in the practice of things.

Readers of Domela Nieuwenhuis will also learn to fear the danger posed by the duplicitous ways of politicians. What is the goal of all sincere socialists? No doubt each of them will agree that his ideal would be a society where each individual, developing fully in his strength, his intelligence and his physical and moral beauty, will freely contribute to the growth of human wealth. But what is the way to get to this state of affairs as quickly as possible? "To preach this ideal, to educate each other, to join together for mutual aid, for the fraternal practice of any good work, for the revolution," will say first of all the naive and the simple like us. "Ah! what a mistake! — we are told — the way is to collect votes and conquer the public powers." According to this parliamentary group, it is advisable to substitute ourselves to the State and, consequently, to use the means of the State, by attracting the voters by all the maneuvers which seduce them, while being careful not to offend their prejudices. Is it not fatal that the candidates for power, led by this policy, take part in intrigues, cabals, parliamentary compromises? Finally, if they one day became the masters, would they not necessarily be trained to use force, with all the apparatus of repression and compression that we call the citizen or national army, the gendarmerie, the police and all the rest of these filthy tools? It is by this path so widely open since the beginning of ages that the innovators will come to power, admitting that the bayonets do not overturn the ballot before the happy date.

The safest way still is to remain naive and sincere, to simply say what our energetic will is, at the risk of being called utopian by some, abominable, monstrous, by others. Our formal, certain, unshakeable ideal is the destruction of the State and all the obstacles that separate us from the egalitarian goal. Let's not play the finest with our enemies. It is by trying to deceive that one becomes fooled.

This is the moral that we find in the work of Nieuwenhuis. Read it, all of you who have a passion for truth and who do not seek it in a dictator's proclamation or in a program written by a whole council of great men.

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