

Social Democracy and Anarchism

Freedom Press, Anonymous

April, 1889

THE most complicated pieces of mechanism are often not the latest but the earliest results of the inventor's skill in a particular direction. Improvements in machinery very frequently take the form of a reduction in the number of wheels and principles of motion, necessary to obtain the desired result, and a machine is considered to be more nearly perfect in proportion as its action becomes more direct. It is safe to conclude, too, that this law of human progression from the complicated to the direct, is by no means confined to mechanics. In philosophy and in sociology similar phenomena may be observed. Thus the Social Democratic scheme for reorganizing society--based as it is upon an insufficient knowledge of the principles which govern the relations of mankind--is full of expedients to reconcile the individual, the municipality and the state, all of which are unnecessary and if tried would prove to be unworkable, unless coercion was introduced. And the public will object quite as much to the coercion of the Social-Democratic Municipality and National Government as it does to government in its existing forms. It is useless for the Social Democrat to say that such coercion would be for the good of the individual coerced: the same thing is said today in defense of the existing laws. A government without officials, police and soldiery to prevent the people exercising their liberty; a government that issues no decrees and passes no laws; a government that has no prisons for the recalcitrant, no punishment for those who refuse to obey its decisions--do our Social Democratic friends dream of such a government as this? Surely not, for in that case it would simply be a committee of talkers to which people would pay just as much attention, is it deserved, and would exercise no more influence upon the society of to-morrow than Queen Victoria does upon the society of to-day. We Anarchists have no objection to a government of this kind, but we would point out to the gentlemen who propose to constitute such a government--if any there be--that they will be wasting their valuable time: whilst they are talking the people will be acting. If, however, the Social Democrats propose that this government of theirs should have powers similar to those exercised by the existing governments then we can detect no difference in kind but only a difference of degree between the despotism of the present time and that which we are asked to establish. And we ask them by what right they propose to coerce a single individual who objects to their proposals?

We do not believe, however, that the Social Democratic workers of Great Britain have as a body given much attention to this matter. They have not, we think, considered the possibilities of the future up to this point--and therefore they remain Social Democrats. We Anarchists on the other hand foresee this contingency of the to-morrow of the Revolution, and we plainly

declare that we are against coercion of any kind whatsoever, and entirely in favor of voluntary agreement. In opposition to the Social Democratic scheme-which is based upon the old plan of transferring authority from the Government, or the King, to the Parliament, from the Parliament to the County or Municipality and so on--we place before the workers a thoroughly democratic ideal-Freedom to every individual limited only by equal freedom to others. The complicated and, as it will be formed, expensive machinery of the Social Democratic State is entirely unnecessary if we are to have, to quote from the program of the S. D. F. "a free condition of society . . . with Equal Social Rights for all and the Complete Emancipation of Labor." Anarchists have faith in their fellow-workers and in their ability to organize freely in accordance with their needs. As our Spanish comrades have put it in their declaration of principles recently adopted at the Congress of Valencia: "The principle of authority or of the direction of society is based upon the assumption that those associated are incapable of ruling themselves, and this principle always degenerates into tyranny." Surely our Social Democratic comrades do not think that they and their fellows are incapable of managing their own business. We don't believe it. But as they have always been governed, they imagine society cannot be held together except by authority.

Let us return to mechanics. After the locomotive was invented and when the idea of a railway system was first conceived early in the present century, progress was delayed for several years through a very curious error. The inventors were of opinion that the adhesion of the smooth wheels of the engine and the carriages upon the equally smooth iron rail must necessarily be so slight that if it should be attempted to drag any considerable weight the wheels might indeed be driven round, but the train would fail to advance because of the continued slipping of the wheels; or that at best a considerable part of the impelling power would be lost through their partial slipping. As a remedy for this supposed evil, Trevithick provided for the rims, or tires of his wheels projections similar to the heads of nails, or otherwise made their surfaces uneven by cutting in them transverse grooves. He further proposed that wherever, as in ascending elevations, in greater amount of the evil was to be apprehended, additional claws or nails should be projected from the rims of the wheels in order more effectually to take hold of the road. Several other inventors went in for rack and toothed wheels and one ingenious gentleman set himself to work to devise an engine with legs similar to those of a horse. He was getting on finely with his invention when the discovery was made that all these contrivances were needless, and that nature in this case required no imitation having herself provided by an immutable law that the adhesion of the wheels with the surface of the rails upon which they are moved is amply sufficient to secure the advance not only of a heavy engine but of an enormous load dragged after it. This law was discovered by Mr. Blackett of Wylaw Colliery, in 1813.

In sociology, Social Democrats have made a mistake similar to that made in mechanics by the early inventors of railways. They have overlooked a natural law which is far more efficacious than all their artificial expedients-the law of the common interest. That law will compel every member of society, when the workers control their own destinies, to consider his neighbors and his action towards them, because each one of us is by nature a social animal; we need our fellows and cannot exist alone; nature obliges us to come to terms with one another. No force, no authority is necessary. It is to the individual interest of each one of us to deal with one another as we would be dealt with, and when the incubus of the State is removed and private property is abolished, we shall do so. As free citizens we shall combine as best will serve our purpose in groups, in combinations of groups or communes, in federations of communes or groups, in societies, etc. Our idea is not to take the clumsy, complicated machine of society as it stands and

attempt to reorganize it from high to low, from the state to the individual; but to discard altogether the ill-contrived mechanism which after so much expenditure of time and energy has failed to promote true association, and leave human nature free to continue that process of Organization from simple to complex, from individual to federation, which is only hindered by governments and codes of law. We shall have conferences such as are held now in various spheres of activity—scientific, religious, and industrial and the opinions of those conferences will have weight with us in proportion as the individuals there assembled appear to us to have knowledge of their subjects. We shall act on those opinions when we think it advisable, and if we do not agree with them we shall disregard them. Having perfect freedom of initiative the most advanced among us will set an example to those who have not attained that standard, which they will assuredly follow if it meets with their approval, just as to-day men and women follow each other's style in dress, in architecture, in manners. What think you of the Anarchist ideal, comrades, the Social Democrats?

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Freedom Press, Anonymous
Social Democracy and Anarchism
April, 1889

Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Socialism, Vol. 3, No. 29, online source RevoltLib.com,
retrieved on May 2, 2020.
Freedom Press, London

theanarchistlibrary.org