Jack White
The Meaning of Anarchism
1937

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their converging or conflicting economic interests which will determine sooner or later - perhaps sooner, alas! - whether the Capitalist ”democracies” will or will not help the Spanish people, led by the present Valencia Government, to defeat Franco and the relics of the clerical aristocratic order, which he seeks to preserve.

Not being a Marxist, I offer no opinion.

And an ”uncontrollable” is an Anarchist who has stuck to Anarchy and who is not, therefore, primarily concerned with the shades or strata of Capitalism, but with revolution by direct action; who believes with Marx indeed that emancipation of the workers must be the work of the workers themselves, but with Bakunin, Kropotkin and Maletesta, that free humanity must be substituted for the State, and that when Anarchists take part in a Government, they allow themselves to be deflected from their proper task and become corrupted by association with an instrument of tyranny. The first false step in Spain was the association of Anarchist leaders with the Government and the State. Had they given all their energies to co-ordination and unified command of CNT Collectives and Anarchist military units, instead of sacrificing Anarchist principles and control to compromises with a Government, the uncontrollables would have remained in control of themselves and ready for co-ordinated action with other sections instead of being sacrificed to a State dictatorship through a political party.

I note that the epithet "uncontrollable" is reserved for my Anarchist comrades. Their fellow criminals in the joint misunderstanding are mostly "Trotskyites." A "Trotskyite", so far as I understand the term is someone who thinks Marx meant what he said when he spoke of the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the transition period from Capitalism to Communism. Mr. Emile Burns, in his book Communism, Capitalism, and the Transition, has put the matter in a nutshell, not only as regards what should happen in theory but what did actually happen in the Russian Revolution. He might have been writing of the revolution that the simple Spanish "Trotskyites" thought they were defending. *"All executive positions,"* writes Mr. Burns, " *which had formerly been filled by appointment from above had to be made elective and the elected persons had to be subject to recall at any moment by the bodies that elected them; therefore from the first day of the revolution the command of armed forces was taken over by elected deputies; the factory workers were armed and fought all the most vital battles; the officials in State Departments were replaced by workers; the managers in the factories were replaced or controlled by councils of workers; the existing Law Courts were abolished and Workers' Courts with elected judges took their place; wherever Soviet order was established, elected workers' Committees took the place of appointed officials."*

Now that is precisely the kind of order that the Spanish "Trotskyites", in common with other Spanish "uncontrollables", thought they were fighting to preserve and maintain from May 2nd to 7th in Barcelona.

But I would hate to be thought a "Trotskyite", for I remember it was Trotsky who helped to smash all that sort of thing at Kronstadt. So I must perforce be an "uncontrollable."

What is the difference between a "Trotskyite" and an "uncontrollable"? I expect I am simple, too, but I will give the only definition my simplicity can rise to. A Trotskyite is a Marxist who has stuck to Marx, who believes for instance, that it is

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leaders have been displaced, imprisoned, murdered, groups of Anarchists have been massacred by Socialist-Communists and the Anarchist idea of revolution, collectivisation of industry and as far as possible the agricultural village-communities, is being stopped and undone. The Anarchists had defeated not only Franco in Catalonia but had superseded the economic order, which Franco is fighting to save and restore. Now the Socialist-Communists are saving and restoring it instead, not for him, of course, but to speed up his defeat. Meanwhile large sections of the Spanish people have misunderstood; things were too puzzling.

When they saw their workers' military and economic committees dissolved, their workers' militia abolished, themselves disarmed and finally the telephone building which they had won by repeated attack from the Fascists in July, forcibly seized from their syndicate by the Govt assault guards, they came out on the streets and erected barricades. They thought their revolution was being destroyed instead of saved. Their misunderstanding was increased by the arrival of French and British warships in Barcelona and the landing of French marines, while the open allies of Franco, the Germans and Italians, continued to blockade them outside the three mile limit. The strange coincidence of the arrival of the French and British warships just at the moment when the workers came out on the streets to save a revolution they believed to be threatened, has been mixed up in their simple proletarian minds with the previous fact that the French and British had been blockading them all along under cover of a non-intervention pact and that the Valencia Government sent troops and threatened to send more to suppress what they thought was the defence of their revolution.

These simple people have been called "uncontrollables." In point of fact they were very easily controlled and went back to their work after six days of almost entirely defensive fighting. One can only hope they will not regret their docility.

spontaneity has to become more dynamic and intense to triumph over intensified and universalised reaction, each succeeding revolution must be more Anarchist in its principle and practice than the last. Socialistic centralisation would thus become counter-revolutionary in effect and have latent affinity with counter-revolutionary forces, no matter how revolutionary its slogans or even its intentions.

Now Spain is deeply impregnated with the psychology, the principle and the practice of Anarchism. It would, I think, be false to insulate this principle and practice of Anarchism from the Spanish racial characteristic of human dignity. The sense of human dignity seems to be consubstantial with every Spaniard and undoubtedly it inspires the Anarchist goal of general freedom and solidarity and the educational voluntary associative methods leading towards it. The situation in Spain today compels us to ask the question: What is the surest guarantee against the triumph of Fascism? Is it the Anarchist psychology and tradition of the Spanish people expressing itself in its own Anarcho-Syndicalist forms or is it centralised State Socialism imposed, or alleged to be imposed, in the interests of maximum military efficiency and the maximum efficiency of production to feed the fighting fronts? May not this efficiency be too dearly bought, if it is bought at the price of damping the revolutionary enthusiasm of the Spanish people and splitting their revolutionary unity even in the interests of a unified command? One might even add with trepidation a further question: Whither is this State centralisation in the interests of Spanish ”democracy” leading? We are assured it is aimed at, and will lead to the speedy defeat of Franco, Have not the Second and Third Internationals agreed to meet to further that most desirable object? So, I note, have the Ambassadors of the capitalist Powers already met and conferred with the Valencia Government. Let us hope they have agreed to co-operate in the speedy defeat of Franco. That, however, is uncertain. One thing is certain. Anarchist

PART I

There has been bloodshed between Anarchists and Stalinist Communists in Catalonia. Many are asking:
(1) Is there so deep-rooted a difference of principle as to provide a philosophical basis for a physical clash?
(2) What is the fundamental principle of Anarchism?
(3) If the Anarchists have a definite and different philosophy, will it work in this wicked world?
I propose to contrast Anarchism with Socialism and Communism, confining my use of the word Socialism to include points where Socialists and Communists agree.

The socialists say: The State has been formed on a class basis to preserve the domination of one class by the domination of the others. To achieve liberation, therefore, we must get possession of the State. When we become masters by election or by insurrection we will abolish its raison d’être, which is the division of society into a possessing and an exploited class. Then the State will wither away and will give place to an economic administration of things, which will no longer have to safeguard the privileges of a minority but to minister to the needs of all. But to abolish the State one must first capture it and use it to destroy the cause which has given it birth - the inequality between the majority which produces everything and the minority which consumes a disproportionate amount of the product of the majority’s labour. That is why it is all important to secure the election of as many MP’s and Municipal Councillors as possible. Their installation will mean so much less to accomplish on the day of the revolution, when we shall have in the persons of our elected representatives guards within the citadel to throw open the gates to us.

To this the Anarchists reply: The State contains a corrupting influence in itself. The people have always been deceived (when they are not machine-gunned) by the revolutionaries who in their ignorance the people have hoisted to power. Con-

sequently, to destroy the State, one must not begin by becoming, the State; for in doing so one becomes automatically its preserver. One becomes so by force of circumstance, without conscious dishonesty, inevitably, because things appear under a different aspect and so many difficulties and duties crop up that no revolutionary turned politician can remain a single minded revolutionary. The State corrupts the purest and the best. So to keep our revolutionary virtue, we must not expose ourselves to its pernicious infection. It is not from above with the machinery of the oppressive State, that one can abolish class society. It is from below that we must wage the war against the privileged class and undermine the foundation of their privileges. *"We will expropriate them by law,"* say the Socialists. *"We can do it without you and your laws,"* reply the Anarchists. *"We know how to strip the bourgeoisie by direct action. Our direct action is a series of attacks incessantly renewed, delivered at one point today and another tomorrow; an endless sequence of major and minor crises, schooling the exploited in practical war against the exploiter and preparing them for the final crisis of the general strike. We feel no need of voting to impose masters on ourselves. We are anti-parliamentarians, abstentionists. In one thing we are faithful Marxists: Did not Marx say, "The emancipation of the workers must be the work of the workers themselves"? Well, we are workers and we will emancipate ourselves. As for you Socialists who offer to liberate us, if we listened to you we should only prepare one more disillusionment for the proletariat. For once become a Government, you would do to us who are the people just what every Government has always done."*

It would seem that the Anarchists have justification for their mistrust, not only in the lessons of history but in the nature of things. Anarcho-syndicalism applies energy at the point of production; its human solidarity is cemented by the association of people in common production undiluted by mere groupings of opinion. Affinity of interests is more stable and more powerful than affinity of opinions. Disunity begins where differences

The Anarchist recognises, implicitly if not explicitly, that there are two reasons, one emotional and creative, arising from inner spontaneity, the other "rational" and dead because its premises are in the past or present status quo and it is therefore reduced to calculate consequences in terms of the past or present status quo rather than create new forms.

The State worship of Communist and Socialism has its source in the failure to lay enough stress on the inner spontaneity of people, and a consequent enslavement to outer externalised forms, such as the State as the source and key to power. The people's only road to real freedom lies in the voluntary co-ordination of their maximum individual spontaneity. All social panaceas that seek to supersede that co-ordinated spontaneity, even as a means to the alleged end of restoring it, must lead not to freedom but to the loss of such freedom as the people have achieved and to increasing depths of tyranny.

PART II

Having brought the Anarchism v. Socialism argument, with which this article opened, to its psychological and philosophical head, let us apply it to recent history in Spain, recent history still pregnant with problems of world-shaking importance.

If people's inner spontaneity is a factor of importance in revolution, increasing in direct ratio with the mechanical perfection and international consolidation of the forces of Fascist repression, are we not apt to overlook the surprises in the unknown destiny of people in our scientific forecasts of the mechanical destination of society? May not our oversight damage our insight into unexpected factors in revolutionary development? We must not divorce the spiritual qualities of a people from our scientific assessment of their place in economic evolution. Almost we might say that if human

misleading. Do the facts support me or do they not? Has successful revolution ever been achieved in a highly industrialised country? It has not. If we analyse the factors in the most recent revolutions we are familiar with, those of Ireland, Russia and Spain, in conjunction with the frustration of revolution in highly industrialised countries, we may have to conclude it is something deeper than bad tactics and treacherous leadership which has thrown out our calculations.

Perhaps the Marxians and even Marx have omitted elemental and human factors, which can express and manifest themselves better through the vehicle of Anarchism. I am not saying Marx was wrong. Obviously he was very largely right. I am suggesting that he did not say the last word about the individual and collective "unconscious" when he interpreted so scientifically the consciousness of the industrial worker.

If we compare the Irish and Russian revolutions, the former has two advantages over the more exclusively proletarian nature of the latter. It preceded it in time, the Dublin rising of 1916 antedating even the Kerensky Revolution by about a year, and it is surpassed in its voluntarism. It was essentially an insurrection of a conscious and voluntary minority forestalling and creating mass conditions rather than await their ripening. If Nationalism has any function in paving the way for International Revolution, Ireland showed that function at its best. In Ireland, Republican Nationalism combined with Irish International Socialism (Connolly and the Citizen Army) against the common Imperial enemy, and in so doing made the only repudiation of the Great War in Western Europe long before the chaos and social military breakdown caused by the war compelled that repudiation, as in Russia, and later to some extent in Germany.

This voluntarism, scorning to calculate consequences and creative of new mass conditions, is the essence of Anarchism with its distrust of majorities and "l'illusion majoritaire" and its respect of spiritual quality rather than numerical quantity.

of abstract opinion can no longer be harmonised and resolved in collective work. We cannot surrender the cause of human freedom to any combination of incongruities, to any "popular front" whose incompatible elements can guarantee nothing but the obligation to compromise. In any popular front, groups and elements are accepted whose economic interests run counter to those of the proletariat. In the people who compose it there are intellectual and moral affinities, which may disappear under pressure. It is dangerous to place people between the appeal of the conscience and reason and the appeal of these interests. These fragile affinities cannot exist in the groupings of anarcho-syndicalism; stronger than any bond of sentiment or of reason there is a bond of interest which unites them, the only stable and solid bond of unity.

The Socialists reply that Anarcho-syndicalist propaganda, just because it makes flank attacks and raids on Capitalism, because its primary object is the defence of local and regional interests, is inadequate to make conscious revolutionaries. Anarcho-syndicalism is good for guerrilla but unsuited to serious organised warfare. Its efforts must automatically be lacking in concentration. Co-ordination and centralisation of effort can be the work only of a Party whose horizon is not limited to a town or an industry but embraces all the complex factors of a national or international situation. In our common interest of the revolution, Socialist and Anarcho-syndicalist action must combine.

The Anarchists answer the Socialists: *"Where is your logic? You assert that in the society which you intend to build, economic groupings will be the only ones and public authority will be limited to the necessary administration to ensure the production and distribution of objects necessary to people's existence. Why then wait for the revolution to give to economic groupings their vital creative function? Let them take the importance today hey will have tomorrow. You admit the State is the effect of class exploitation and its function is to maintain it. We prefer to attack the*

cause. Leave the workers to fight heir own battle on their own ground. Don't ask them to idle themselves with political masters, who the day after they conquer state power will want, like all conquerors, to remain the masters. Between employer and worker there is a brutal vis-à-vis. Against the tremendous power of the State one must stoop to tactics; sometimes one has to combine these tactics with those of other Parties. The proletariat finds it hard to follow these long range operations, or it gets concerned with their detail, missing their whole scope: thus it risks contradicting a political habit of mind, which slowly atrophies the revolutionary spirit. The working class, economically organised, is sufficient unto itself, it needs only to be conscious of its power; electoral and parliamentary combinations can only delay the day of self-realisation."

Steklov, in his history of the First international, speaks of the split in it as caused by the past of the international proletariat rising in revolt against its future. He means by this that Bakunin and the Anarchists thought it was possible to jump straight from the decay of feudal aristocracy, which from 1848 began definitely to collapse in favour of bourgeois industrialism, to the proletarian revolution.

"The broad masses of the workers," says Steklov, *"for the time led astray by Bakunin, returned to the broad river of International Socialism."* Dare we reply that the broad river of revolutionary destiny, for a time mapped correctly by Marx over a stage of its course, shows signs of reverting to a deeper bed charted by the genius of Bakunin.

Marx was, "par excellence", the prophet of the industrial proletariat; any developments depending solely on that proletariat had to await its growth and class conscious solidarity; and that growth and solidarity had to await in turn the maturity, not to say the overripe bursting, of the bourgeois order. This patient dependence on ripening external conditions gives to Marxism an element of fatalism in sharp contrast with the unconditioned spontaneity of Anarchism.

"Anarchism does not wait. It acts in the individual and in small groups to build up social forms, which shall be, as near as possible, embryos of the fully developed Anarchist society."

"Hope deferred maketh the heart sick," and any philosophy of action preaching present revolt as the best preparation for future revolution on a wide scale starts with an appeal to the fighter and people of action rather than the theoretician, which is psychologically sound. To the seer the Kingdom of Heaven is always at hand, and its proximity calls for immediate preparation. And though the seers are generally wrong in their time forecast, they are often more right than the scientist about the fundamentals of cataclysmic change.

Bakunin was a seer, Marx was a Scientist. Bakunin was greatly influenced by the just and elemental protests of the peasants ruined by dawning Capitalism, and he believed he could enlist the revolting bourgeois intellectuals in the service of complete social liquidation. He was wrong as to the time. But Marx was wrong in his scientific belief that revolution would spread automatically out of the most highly industrialised countries. The revolt not of Germany or France but of Ireland and Russia during the Great War is one up for Bakunin's rapport with elemental human and one down for Marx's analysis of the scientifically conditioned mass.

"What!" I hear someone exclaim. *"You place the Irish National Rebellion on a par with the Russian proletarian revolution and use both to discredit the accuracy of Marxian analysis! What heresy run to insanity is this?"*

Just a minute, friend; I am pleading for two things: spontaneous voluntarism versus scientific social conditioning, and the elemental vitality retained by a peasantry, as indispensable features in revolution. I am suggesting that though the industrial proletariat has the strongest incentive to make the revolution, they are too mechanised and lack the vital force ever to do so unaided, and that therefore a social science based on industrial economics alone as the determining factor is inevitably