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Anarchism: Communist or Individualist? Both

Max Nettlau

1914

Anarchism is no longer young, and it may be time to ask ourselves why, with all the energy devoted to its propaganda, it does not spread more rapidly. For even where local activity is strongest, the results are limited, whilst immense spheres are as yet hardly touched by any propaganda at all. In discussing this question, I will not deal with the problem of Syndicalism, which, by absorbing so much of Anarchist activity and sympathies, cannot by that very fact be considered to advance the cause of Anarchism proper, whatever its other merits may be. I will also try not to repeat what I put forward in other articles in years gone by as possible means of increasing the activity of Anarchists. As my advice was not heeded, it cannot, in any case, be considered to have hampered the progress of our ideas.

I will consider the theories of Anarchism only; and here I have been struck for a long time by the contrast between the largeness of the aims of Anarchism — the greatest possible realization of freedom and well-being for all — and the narrowness, so to speak, of the economic program of Anarchism, be it Individualist or Com-

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munist. I am inclined to think that the feeling of the inadequacy of this economic basis — exclusive Communism or exclusive Individualism, according to the school — hinders people from acquiring practical confidence in Anarchism, the general aims of which appeal as a beautiful ideal to many. I feel myself that neither Communism nor Individualism, if it became the sole economic form, would realize freedom, which always demands a choice of ways, a plurality of possibilities. I know that Communists, when asked pointedly, will say that they should have no objection to Individualists who wished to live in their own way without creating new monopolies or authority, and *vice versa*. But this is seldom said in a really open and friendly way; both sections are far too much convinced that freedom is only possible if *their* particular scheme is carried out. I quite admit that there are Communists and Individualists to whom their respective doctrines, and these alone, give complete satisfaction and leave no problem unsolved (in their opinion); these would not be interfered with, in any case, in their lifelong constancy to *one* economic ideal. But they must not imagine that all people are constituted after their model and likely to come round to their views or remain “unreclaimed” adversaries on whom no sympathy is to be wasted. Let them but look on real life, which is bearable at all only by being varied and differentiated, in spite of all official uniformity. We all see the survivals of earlier Communism, the manifold workings of present-day solidarity, from which new forms of future Communism may develop — all this in the teeth of the cut-throat capitalist Individualism which predominates. But this miserable bourgeois Individualism, if it created a desire for solidarity, leading to Communism, certainly also created a desire for a genuine, free, unselfish Individualism, where freedom of action would no longer be misused to crush the weaker and to form monopolies, as to-day.

Neither Communism nor Individualism will ever disappear; and if by some mass action the foundations of some rough form of Communism were laid, Individualism would grow stronger than

unhurt, but exclusivism would be banished, the two vital principles of life allied instead of looking askance at each other.

Authority and ordinary selfishness are far too powerful and common enemies to all of us that we can afford to waste energy on internal struggles which, by establishing dogmatism, would sap the very roots of Anarchism.

which will make Communist Anarchism stand stronger and shine brighter before the world than it does now.

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P. S. — Since writing the above I have found an early French Anarchist pamphlet, from which I translate the following:

“Thus, those who feel so inclined will unite for common life, duties, and work, whilst those to whom the slightest act of submission would give umbrage will remain individually independent. The real principle [of Anarchism] is this far from demanding integral Communism. But it is evident that for the benefit of certain kinds of work many producers will unite, enjoying the advantages of co-operation. But I say once more, Communism will never be a fundamental [meaning unique and obligatory] principle, on account of the diversity of our intellectual faculties, of our needs, and of our will.”

This quotation (the words in brackets are mine) is taken from p. 72 of what may be one of the scarcest Anarchist publications, on which my eye lit on a bookstall ten days after writing the above article: “Philosophie de l’insoumission ou Pardon a Cain,” par Felix P. (New York, 1854, iv. 74 pp., 12mo) — that is, “Philosophy of Non-Submission,” the author’s term for Anarchy. I do not know who Felix P. was; apparently one of the few French Socialists, like Dejacque, Bellegarrigue, Coeurderoy, and Claude Pelletier, whom the lessons of 1848 and other experiences caused to make a bold step forward and arrive at Anarchism by various ways and independent of Proudhon. In the passage quoted he put things into a nutshell, leaving an even balance between the claims of Communism and Individualism. This is exactly what I feel in 1914, sixty years after. The personal predilections of everybody would remain unchanged and

ever in opposition to this. Whenever a uniform system prevails, Anarchists, if they have their ideas at heart, will go ahead of it and never permit themselves to become fossilised upholders of a given system, be it that of the purest Communism.

Will they, then, be always dissatisfied, always struggling, never enjoying rest? They might feel at ease in a state of society where all economic possibilities had full scope, and then their energy might be applied to peaceful emulation and no longer to continuous struggle and demolition. This desirable state of things could be prepared from now, if it were once for all frankly understood among Anarchists that both Communism and Individualism are equally important, equally permanent; and that the exclusive predominance of either of them would be the greatest misfortune that could befall mankind. From isolation we take refuge in solidarity, from too much society we seek relief in isolation: both solidarity and isolation are, each at the right moment, freedom and help to us. All human life vibrates between these two poles in endless varieties of oscillations.

Let me imagine myself for a moment living in a free society. I should certainly have different occupations, manual and mental, requiring strength or skill. It would be very monotonous if the three or four groups with whom I would work (for I hope there will be no Syndicates then!) would be organized on exactly the same lines; I rather think that different degrees or forms of Communism will prevail in them. But might I not become tired of this, and wish for a spell of relative isolation, of Individualism? So I might turn to one of the many possible forms of “equal exchange” Individualism. Perhaps people will do one thing when they are young and another thing when they grow older. Those who are but indifferent workers may continue with their groups; those who are efficient will lose patience at always working with beginners and will go ahead by themselves, unless a very altruist disposition makes it a pleasure to them to act as teachers or advisers to younger people. I also think that at the beginning I should adopt Communism with friends and

Individualism with strangers, and shape my future life according to experience. Thus, a free and easy change from one variety of Communism to another, thence to any variety of Individualism, and so on, would be the most obvious and elementary thing in a really free society; and if any group of people tried to check this, to make one system predominant, they would be as bitterly fought as revolutionists fight the present system.

Why, then, was Anarchism cut up into the two hostile sections of Communists and Individualists? I believe the ordinary factor of human shortcomings, from which nobody is exempt, accounts for this. It is quite natural that Communism should appeal more to some, Individualism to others. So each section would work out their economic hypothesis with full ardour and conviction, and by-and-by, strengthened in their belief by opposition, consider it the *only* solution, and remain faithful to it in the face of all. Hence the Individualist theories for about a century, the Collectivist and Communist theories for about fifty years, acquired a degree of settledness, certitude, apparent permanency, which they never ought to have assumed, for stagnation — this is the word — is the death of progress. Hardly any effort was made in favor of dropping the differences of schools; thus both had full freedom to grow, to become generalized, if they could. With what result?

Neither of them could vanquish the other. Wherever Communists are, Individualists will originate from their very midst; whilst no Individualist wave can overthrow the Communist strongholds. Whilst here aversion or enmity exists between people who are so near each other, we see Communist Anarchism almost effacing itself before Syndicalism, no longer scorning compromise by accepting more or less the Syndicalist solution as an inevitable stepping-stone. On the other hand, we see Individualists almost relapse into bourgeois fallacies — all this at a time when the misdeeds of authority, the growth of State encroachments, present a better occasion and a wider field than ever for real and outspoken Anarchist propaganda.

It has come to this, that at the French Communist Anarchist Congress held in Paris last year Individualism was regularly stigmatised and placed outside the pale of Anarchism by a formal resolution. If ever an international Anarchist Congress was held on these lines, endorsing a similar attitude, I should say good-bye to all hopes placed in this kind of sectarian Anarchism.

By this I intend neither to defend nor to combat Communism or Individualism. Personally, I see much good in Communism; but the idea of seeing it generalized makes me protest. I should not like to pledge my own future beforehand, much less that of anybody else. The Question remains entirely open for me; experience will show which of the extreme and of the many intermediate possibilities will be the best on each occasion, at each time. Anarchism is too dear to me that I should care to see it tied to an economic hypothesis, however plausible it may look to-day. Unique solutions will never do, and whilst everybody is free to believe in and to propagate his own cherished ideas, he ought not to feel it right to spread them except in the form of the merest hypothesis, and every one knows that the literature of Communist and Individualist Anarchism is far from keeping within these limits; we have all sinned in this respect.

In the above I have used the terms “Communist” and “Individualist” in a general way, wishing to show the useless and disastrous character of sectional exclusiveness among Anarchists. If any Individualists have said or done absurd things (are Communists impeccable?), to show these up would not mean to refute me. All I want is to see all those who revolt against authority work on lines of general solidarity instead of being divided into little chapels because each one is convinced he possesses a correct economic solution of the social problem. To fight authority in the capitalist system and in the coming system of State Socialism, or Syndicalism, or of both, or all the three combined, an immense wave of real Anarchist feeling is wanted, before ever the question of economic remedies comes in. Only recognize this, and a large sphere of solidarity will be created,