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Ōsugi Sakae
Social Idealism
1920

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Social Idealism

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After the execution Kōtoku Shūsui in 1911 , Ōsugi Sakae (1885–1923) became one of the leading anarchists in Japan. He had escaped arrest in the high treason trial that sent Kōtoku, Kanno and the others to their deaths because he was already in prison for his anarchist activities. He advocated and practiced free love, and was an early Japanese proponent of anarcho-syndicalism. Initially sympathetic to the Russian Revolution, he became a critic of Bolshevism and translated essays by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman exposing the Bolshevik dictatorship. In 1923, Ōsugi, his lover, the anarchist feminist Ito Noe, and Ōsugi's six year old nephew were brutally murdered by the Japanese military police. The following excerpts are from Yoshiharu Hashimoto's translation of Ōsugi's declaration from 1920, "A Socialized Idealism," in *A Short History of the Anarchist Movement in Japan* (Tokyo: Idea Publishing, 1979). The translation has been modified by the editor for stylistic reasons.

KROPOTKIN OFTEN SAID THAT A WORKER ought to have an idea of the society of the future that he intends to

construct. Unless he grasps this notion, the worker will be an instrument of revolution, never a master of it.

In truth, up till now, the worker has been used in every revolution as an instrument to destroy the old regime, and has had no share in the construction of the new society. Indeed, the workers have destroyed most of the old, but left the rest in others' hands, so that the so-called new society belongs to others, like the former society ...

Suppose, however, that the worker had no notion or a new social organization: if he could participate in the destruction of the old society as well as in the construction of the new one, he would be master of the revolution.

Suppose that the worker had an idea, but it was the product of someone else's knowledge: he could not be a true master of the revolution ... Therefore, when the worker wants to be a true master of the revolution, in other words, to construct a new society for himself, he should cultivate his autonomy; above all, the emancipation of the worker is the task of the worker himself...

You may complain that "we do not understand what idea or ideals we should hold whatever notion or ideal of a new social organization you may suggest." There are many examples put before the worker: anarchism, social democracy, syndicalism and guild socialism. However, the worker does not know which is the better choice at the present time. Each of them has a plausible rationale. Thus, the worker does not understand, in truth, which is best. Moreover, he must think about advancing his own life before examining an idea or ideal by comparing these different examples. While he is engaged in his own urgent business, he gradually conceives of his position in relation to that between capitalist and worker, then between the government and the capitalist. Even he realizes the fundamental defect in the present social order. Further, he awakens his free spirit, which is even stronger than the conception of his position that he develops during his efforts to change working

conditions. It is a fact that I have seen among the workers, that the worker tries to link his free spirit to the social knowledge that he has obtained before accepting the social idea or ideal as it is presented to him. The worker has been preparing his conclusions under the influence of the various examples presented to him instead of acquiring his own ...

An idea or ideal is a great power or light as it is. But such power or light will decrease when it is separated from the reality where it is cultivated ...

It is the same with an idea or ideal of the future society that the worker undertakes to construct. The anarchist, social democratic and syndicalist ideas or ideals of a future society may imply a power or light constructed by Western or American workers. It is better for them to advance under their own power or light. Yet there is a considerable distance between their reality and that of a Japanese worker ...

There is no other means than to promote the reality conforming to their temperament and surroundings, while we seek our own idea or ideal.

Then we can make it our motto: to act like a believer, to think like a sceptic.