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Objections to Anarchism: What's in a name?

Albert Meltzer

14 June 1947

Anarchists are often told that they have adopted a name that “prejudices” people. Frankly we would have no objection to jettisoning the name and adopting a comfortable alias if we thought the name “Anarchist” unreasonably hampered the growth of anarchist ideas, but we do not think this is so. It is perhaps true that the term “Anarchist” sends shivers down the backs of the timorous middle-class, but so do the ideas the term represents. Many of these ideas could be known under other names, but all these names have been adopted by tendencies of a far different nature. For instance, the term “Liberal” means someone who believes in liberty and is a word which has been used by revolutionary thinkers (even by Anarchists — the Mexican Anarchist pioneers using the name in the Revolution) but it has been adopted by one of the (formerly) great capitalist parties and is now unmistakably associated with that particular party or with Capitalist Democracy generally. The term “Libertarian” which has the same root but different associations, is better, but in so far as it does not explain what Liberty is, can be

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used by people¹ with all sorts of woolly ideas on Liberty, who avoid the plain fact that Liberty is No Government, not a modified form of Government. The term Anarchy means plainly and simply No Government and is the best “patent” label for our movement.

As regards the economic pattern of Anarchism, “Communism” was a respected revolutionary term, and undoubtedly “Anarchist Communism” perfectly describes our theories. But Lenin borrowed the term Communism to describe Marxism, since “Socialism” was at the time identified with the right wing of the Social-Democrats, to which party the Russian Bolsheviks belonged. “Communism” has since become identified in the public mind with Bolshevism. In the *A.B.C. of Anarchism* Alexander Berkman makes an explanation which at the time he was writing (1928) was quite logical:

“The Bolsheviks are Communists but they want their dictatorship, their government, to compel people to live in Communism. Anarchist Communism, on the contrary, means voluntary Communism. Communism from free choice.”

However, it cannot be said, in my opinion, that this still holds good, because “Communism” is now unalterably identified in the public mind with Bolshevism and present-day Bolshevism — or Stalinism — has in the past ten years become not merely “authoritarian communism” but plainly authoritarianism. Anarchism is a libertarian idea of the communist experiment, but not a libertarian version of Russian State Capitalism which in its Stalinist phase is completely different and divorced even from authoritarian communism.

To describe the means of achieving what we can call anarchist communism but with a definite accent on the anarchism,

¹ The term “libertarian socialist” now being used by the circles which used to prefer the name “revolutionary socialist”.

“syndicalism” is a good term but it has to be qualified. Syndicalism is revolutionary unionism and we use it to describe the method of organization whereby the workers get together at the place of work, and by organizing against the employing class, prepare for the day when they can take over each industry. Of course, this could be done with authoritarian ideas as to the dominance of particular industries, and to show that it must be imbued with the idea of communalism and freedom our qualifying way of saying the word has to be “*Anarcho-syndicalism*.”

You see, the word anarchism is an essential to our movement. Anarchy means no government, and the only way any social advance can take place is in spite of and against governmentalism. The method of syndicalist organisation and communist reconstruction are essentially bound up with the qualifying fact that this revolutionary process can only be anti-governmental, since the State acts as the grave-digger of any insurrection.

While some Anarchists believe in altering the word in the belief that this may dispel the prejudices which these who have been influenced by capitalist propaganda may have, I am of the opinion that more than ever to-day we need a slogan challenging the basis of State servility and capitalist greed, one incorporated into the name of our movement, and this, even more than the determination to stand by a name with such a glorious history, impels me to underline the following passage from Kropotkin:

‘We are often reproached for using such a name as that of “Anarchists”. “As to your ideas,” we are told, “they might do; I like them pretty well; but what of this unfortunate name! How will you become a powerful party whilst keeping that name which implies disorder, destruction and chaos? ...

‘We prefer “disorder” to that sort of “order” which once “reigned” at Warsaw, or the “order” which

was “re-established” at Paris by the slaughter of thirty thousand workers; that “order”, the triumph of which is proclaimed each time that the beginning of a revolution has been stifled in the blood of the working men. That *order*, which is always the same eternal oppression once more re-established, we do not want. We prefer a thousand times the *disorder* of the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century, of the revolutionists of 1793, of Garibaldi, of the Commune of 1871, and of so many others to whom the bourgeois dedicate the title — quite glorious in our eyes — of “fomenters of disorder”.

‘Moreover, we have often said that word “Anarchy” — apart from its very precise literal signification of negation of the State — has already a glorious past. It dates, in fact, from the great French Revolution, when all true revolutionists who did not stop midway but went to the root of a system, doomed to fall, were called “Anarchists”.

‘As to all other names — “Libertarians”, “Acratists” (no demomination), “anti-Statists”, &c., which are sometimes used to evade the great persecutions — they have one common defect of not giving expression to our character of revolutionists — of men who adopt *revolutionary* means to accomplish *fundamentally, essentially revolutionary changes*.’