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Is Anarchist Social Revolution Possible?

Alexander Atabekian

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That a state “social revolution” was possible and what it was capable of leading us to, was shown by the deplorable experience of the seizure of power by the Bolshevik Social-Democrats with the realisation of the dictatorship of the proletariat, together with the “poorest peasantry”, and the beginning of socialist construction by state, legislative means.

Let it not be said by the socialist-statesmen of the other parties that they would have handled the matter differently. Either they would have done nothing essential, or, at most, they would have eliminated the glaring absurdities in the external manifestations of Bolshevik tactics. But the essence of the matter, the Utopian state method of solving the social question, would have remained at the heart of their activity.

The theory of scientific anarchism approaches the social question on a completely different plane. Anarchism sees the possibility, or rather the necessity, of the emergence of new social orders out of the existing elements of the modern order and, precisely, as a result of their natural development, rather than violence over this development on the part of state power.

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Anarchism seeks to introduce a conscious element into this process of development in order to accelerate it, so it is revolutionary, but not utopian like state socialism, which seeks to “decree” everything down to the self-consciousness of the masses.

But what is social revolution?

If by social revolution we understand the immediate transition to such social orders, where private ownership of the means of production in all its forms is completely abolished; where the concept of value and monetary exchange are completely absent; where labour is a voluntary, healthy and pleasant pastime; where technology is everywhere so developed that all kinds of wealth are piled up in a heap more than we all need; where everyone takes according to their needs, without limit, like free air, then such a system of super-communism will hardly come to an immediate end.

Mankind stands in the most various stages of civilisation, beginning with the primitive state. Even in the same country the difference between the degree of cultural development of the industrial centers and the countryside is enormous. This difference hangs heavy ballast on the driving forces of socialism. But just as in the eighteenth century, capitalism did not wait for its widespread development to proclaim new social and political principles during the Great French Revolution, so now the social revolution must come before the same development of civilisation everywhere.

The history of civilisation knows no leaps. It is not revolutions that create and develop the general culture and in it the technique of production. Revolutions only change at an accelerated rate the legal relations of the various classes in a given society, but the social revolution changes still the basic economic relations of the haves and have-nots.

Thus, the question is reduced to the following: at the given level of development of productive technique and culture, is it possible to bring about a radical *equalising* change in the

relations between the classes of the haves and have-nots, the rich and the poor, the industrial and landed bourgeoisie and the working proletariat and the landed or landless peasantry?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary not to appeal to one's feeling and imagination, not to ask for socialist and general scientific literature, but to take a closer look at the life boiling around us, to try to understand, weigh and evaluate all those phenomena and changes in social life, which occur, we may say, flow before our eyes so quickly that one hardly has time to look at them. And the history of the last 3–4 years, the history of the period of the world catastrophe — the war and the Russian Revolution — has brought forward a lot of such phenomena and factors.

First of all, the practice of rationing the distribution of necessities appeared on a large scale both in Western Europe and in our country. In this phenomenon it is not the technique that is important, it is not the degree of perfection with which it is carried out that is important — time and experience will correct the defects — it is not even the cause that is important, but the foundation that equalises all strata of the population. This is *the foundation of equality of all*, rich and poor, before necessity.

The penetration of this foundation into the consciousness of the masses made possible the application of a deeply constraining system. But these constraints are not inherent in the system; the defects of its application will gradually be eliminated (house committees, for example, and other organisations are beginning to play a great role in this matter), but the *foundation*, namely *equality of distribution*, will remain.

Having started with foodstuffs, this distribution has spread to articles of clothing and the rationing of housing distribution is on the way. In the same way, the distribution of materials and raw materials in industry is being regulated, and this foundation will probably extend to its financing.

In this way, the foundation of equality of distribution is taking hold in the more or less cultural centers, in the cities, in all the main branches of public and private life.

What is most important is that this foundation of equal distribution, despite and in spite of the interference of the authorities, tends to become purely organic, economic, extra-political. Having originated under the autocracy, it went its own way under the Provisional Government and continued to exist uninterruptedly and almost independently both during and after the October coup d'état. In the course of its development, it will finally be freed from the tutelage of the authorities and will enter into the way of economic life of peoples and cities on a par with other public services, such as the post and telegraph, or the supply of water, electric power, streetcar traffic, etc.

The second characteristic phenomenon is the extraordinary increase in the number of strikes after the February Revolution, which have been *successful in their immediate aim*. The working masses, taking advantage of the favorable condition of the process of the decomposition of the state power, are striving to acquire no longer the minimum of subsistence, but the *minimum of contentment*. On all sides we hear the observation that the worker now earns a lot, and is fed and clothed better. Of course, this improvement in his material life is often fleeting, especially for families: financial ruin and ever-increasing costliness soon reduce his high earnings to their former purchasing level. As a result, the worker makes new material demands on industry, often without regard to its profitability, and in the midst of the struggle, frustrates, sabotages, and destroys it.

Two phenomena are important in this process: the consciousness of the right to a *minimum of contentment and the destruction of production*.

The first, combined with the foundation of equality of distribution, leads to the establishment of *economic equality*, and the second, since life is impossible without production, *to the reorganisation of industry on new principles*.

The task of the anarchist is to look into the course of history and to bring into the social ferment an element of conscious construction of a new society by the workers themselves.

Summarising the above, we see that the accelerated development of modern social life leads to the realisation of the following principles:

1. equality of distribution;
2. minimum contentment;
3. collective production without masters and landlords;
4. the destruction of the private right to rent land and dwellings;
5. disintegration of state power to the point of total abolition, or political anarchy;
6. social and economic order organised by *Soviets of workers' delegates*;
7. inter-communal solidarity, without state boundaries, and, with it,
8. the end of war forever.

All this constitutes the immediate stage of development of the cultured countries and in this sense a social revolution is imminent.

Social revolution is only possible as an anarchist revolution.

More and more often the workers are making attempts to take over the management of production and, often, the capitalists themselves are forced to offer them this in the precarious hope of saving their property for the future. What is important is not that these attempts so far have failed, that the first pan-cakes came out wrong; what is important is the penetration into the working masses of the consciousness of the *right* to take over production, and the possibility of *trying to use this right practically*.

What is important is the emergence of those factory committees which today claim only to control the profitability of industry, but tomorrow will be in charge of it, will replace *both the owners and the factory administration*.

Then the desire to improve their material well-being will itself force the workers to raise their productivity; then the interests of production and the interests of the producers will coincide, strikes will themselves disappear and the anti-social, corrupting skill of sabotage will be eradicated.

Another important factor in the revolution: these are the so-called "agrarian disturbances". In these, too, it is not excesses, not clearings, not pogroms, not arson — these sad but frequent companions of the birth pains of the new social orders — but the *seizure of land* by the peasants, the refusal to pay rents, the actual *taking possession of land*, even if in violation of all the programs of the socialist parties, that is important.

Norms for the use of land will be worked out by practice itself, according to favorable conditions and better than any invented laws. In vain are the anxieties of the socialist-statesmen on this subject.

In the big cities, too, the land question has been put on the line, *the question of expropriating the land with its profitable properties* in favor of the community, in order to join the urban economy. In carrying out this transformation, a great practical role will be played by house committees, which, on behalf of the recognised administrative body of the community, will

take over the supervision and management of the houses instead of the landlords.

The Russian Revolution practically revealed another essential foundation. Alongside the old electoral system, which regarded society as a homogeneous whole, deciding public questions by mechanical counting of votes, it put forward Soviets of workers' deputies,¹ in which should be represented, according to the branches of public services and production, the *entire working population*, which constitutes the basis of all society. The revolution seeks to create an *organised order* out of the socially useful productive forces, instead of the abstraction of a supra-class elective power, practically reduced to the power of capitalists and landlords.

It is not important that politics has crept into the Soviets, that the socialist-statesmen are leading them off the revolutionary-economic path and have frightened the bourgeoisie into seizing power, which they do not even know how to cope with, thanks to which, fortunately, they only destroy it; but it is important that the Soviets are striving to free themselves from all central power and are clearing the way for the reorganisation of the economic foundations of the social order, for the transfer of the means of production and its management to factory committees and workers' trade unions (syndicates). The Soviets are essentially striving to organise the coordination of the activities of the latter outside the government, in political anarchy.

To what does all this lead us?

Obviously, to a new social order, where all the instruments of collective labour will be in the use of the workers' trade unions; where all profitable real estate in the cities will be taken over by the respective communities under the management of

¹ It would have been more correct to call them "*councils of labour delegates*". The word "labour" would unite both peasants and intellectual toilers of liberal professions. The Soviets of Soldiers' Deputies, as a temporary institution connected with the war, should disappear.

house committees; where land will cease to yield rents; where individual crafts and farming will exist alongside factory production and agricultural economies in the hands of former proletarians and sharecroppers, as well as communal land use. To a system in which monetary commodity exchange will be temporarily preserved, since a tinkling coin is nowadays the same commodity.

This is the sense in which an *anarchist social revolution* is now possible.

The historical course of social development itself puts the practical solution of social problems on the line. It is not the propaganda of the socialist parties in general, increasingly reduced to electoral agitation and the making up of laws, not the bloody convulsions of Bolshevism, not the tactical errors of the anarchists with their groundless seizures that create the possibility of realising the social revolution, but life itself, history itself, unfolding at an accelerated pace under the impetus of the world war.

By striving for the destruction of the exploitation of labour and the establishment of economic equality, the social revolution will thereby eliminate the reason for the emergence and existence of power, it will thereby destroy territorial statehood and lead to a commonwealth of peoples without mutual oppression, without state borders.

The process of decomposition of state power, which is now taking place before our eyes, will give room for the development of self-activity of the natural groupings of the population — the territorial communities, will expand the scope of their economic life, covering both the production of wealth and the equal distribution and exchange of goods, under the guidance of a new administrative body, the Soviet of workers' delegates.

The rudiments of the new social orders may find rapid development and realisation in real life, but they may also be delayed in their growth or stalled for a long time.