

Questions of Theory and Practice

On Anarchist Literature, Tactics and Organisation

Alexander Atabekian

1918

Contents

I. A few words about anarchist literature	3
II. On the revolutionary methods of some anarchists	5
III. On organisation: federation or aggregation?	7

I. A few words about anarchist literature

In reviewing anarchist literature, periodicals and pamphlets, one is struck by the obscurity and confusion of views which reign in the minds of many comrades. In the great majority of articles, not excluding notes of an informative character, there is no connecting link between anarchist thought and the method of evaluating social phenomena. It is not a question of the rather numerous articles in which a frenzied, almost morbid, incoherent phraseology replaces common sense. There are other articles which are consistent in their logical construction and witty in their form of presentation, but after reading which the reader must make an effort of thought to grasp the connection of what is said with both the doctrine of anarchy and with real life; consequently our literature loses much of its propaganda power.

This is due to two main reasons: the first is what Prof. Sombart called the *mechanisation* of ideas and slogans by political parties;¹ the second is the neglect by many anarchist literary writers of the method of studying social phenomena which lies at the very basis of scientific anarchism — *the method of evolutionary thinking*.

The political parties of the statesmen strive to recruit as many people as possible into their ranks, in the shortest possible time, for the purpose of seizing power as soon as possible (by election ballots or directly by violence). They therefore do not stop at serious propaganda of their ideas, drawing as many people as possible into their ranks, nor do they care about their ideological training. In order to achieve the immediate goal of seizing power as quickly as possible (this is equally achieved by both socialist and bourgeois political parties), they *agitate*. In the midst of this agitation an impossible moral atmosphere of enmity is created, reaching the point of misanthropy, where one does not recognise one's own, and where words *lose their direct meaning*, become disconnected from reality, and are deprived of concrete content.

Anarchist literature has not escaped contamination by this process of distortion of concepts and the words that express them. "Social revolution," "unification from the bottom-up on federative principles," "free commune," "anarchist communism," "destruction of private property," etc. These slogans are essentially disconnected from real life, *mechanised* terms, or simply distorted concepts into which concrete content is to either be added or discarded. Anarchist literature repeats these and similar slogans at every turn, rarely caring to put practical content into them.

Another omission in anarchist literature is that many of our comrades, newspaper workers and authors of leaflets and pamphlets, approach questions without a system, without a method. They begin to examine the phenomena in which they are interested on their own, approach them with a more or less arbitrary and superficial critical analysis, measure them according to the ready-made tenets of their anarchist faith, and accordingly draw certain practical conclusions; they do not try to grasp the links between the phenomenon in question and the past, to establish its place in the progressive movement of history — hence the confusion in anarchist tactics, the differences in the evaluation of the tactics of other political parties, the intolerance of some and the fascination with others (like the Bolsheviks): in short, the mistakes that anarchists are now making.

All this comes from the fact that we lost sight of the above-mentioned method of studying phenomena, which is the basis of scientific anarchism — *the method of evolutionary thinking*.

¹ See "Politics as a Profession", Prof Totomianz's account of Sombart. — Izd. "Pochin", 1918.

We cannot approach social questions only from the point of view of benefit and harm — they must be considered from the point of view of cultural development, *evolution*.

The strength of the works of our teacher Kropotkin lies in the fact that he makes extensive use of this method and was the first, more fully than others, to apply it in substantiating the doctrine of anarchism; that is why he is considered one of the main founders of modern anarchism. And since this method is scientific and there is no objection to sound scientific arguments, almost all our opponents bow to the conclusions of Comrade Kropotkin and only postpone the realisation of his ideals... to the distant future.

As if scientific anarchism predetermines the realisation of its ideals in such-and-such a year, instead of seeking only to *deliberately accelerate* that process, there is seldom any argument against its the completion in the future! The distant or near future is a stretchable concept, and no one can foresee the rate of progressive development of history in order to calculate a time limit for the completion of evolution into anarchy.

Kropotkin's application of this evolutionary method is the main value of his works. Take "The Conquest of Bread": the book begins with an account in a few strokes of the history of culture, the history of the development of the means of production, and ends with a detailed study of the stage reached by this culture, which is why Kropotkin's account acquires such force of cogency.

Every theory must also correspond to the practice of the party that recognises it. Take the land question. How many of our comrades are trying to cut it down with a single stroke of the pen, like the socialist-statesmen. But those, the state-socialists, count on the power of coercion and punishment (the question now is not how far it is possible to remake life by the laws), while we, the anarchists, repeat after the socialists their generalising slogans calculated on coercion, and do not even ask ourselves what stage of culture farming is at in this or that province, in these or those remote outskirts. We forget even that in Russia, or in the country formerly known as Russia — since now it is undergoing an intensified decomposition of its statehood — there are still almost primitive, nomadic nationalities.

Even when speaking of cultural centres, we lose sight of the evolutionary method of scientific anarchism and get carried away by the social experiments of such state parties as the Bolshevik party. We forget that their decrees from above will not remake life, that even the best laws will only bring more confusion and destruction into it, which, in the end, will affect the ordinary working people with all its weight.

Scientific anarchism, like socialism in general, provides for the socialisation of the means of production in the evolution of production. The anarchist-revolutionary who wishes to pass from theory to practice must first of all find out for himself, *by concrete example*, how to put this into practice, and then teach the workers to do it themselves, with their own hands, so as not to upset, not to stop the production which feeds them and their families. Without this condition, all attempts at social revolution are doomed to failure and will degenerate into conspiracies for ill-conceived, groundless coups or into reliance on state power, which some anarchists have become so fond of that they have helped the Social-Democratic Bolshevik Party to seize it. Let the Socialist-State parties fight among themselves and wrest power from each other's hands; each such strife, perhaps, knocks a new stone out of the foundation of statehood and makes our work easier. But what unnecessary, avoidable sacrifices it costs the people!

The main obstacle, in these days of the disintegration of power, is not statehood alone, but the inability, the unpreparedness of the workers to take production into their own hands; the main obstacle is that all the socialists, in their enthusiasm for the propaganda of the theory of

class struggle, have divided even the working people into two, now almost hostile camps, into technically trained intellectual toilers and ordinary craftsmen and workers.

Now the struggle between the latter, between the so-called skilled craftsmen and the ordinary workers, has already begun.

A new order of social life cannot be built on universal enmity, on the struggle of all against all, without universal ethical foundations which are obligatory towards enemies and friends alike.

It is not only the strength of statehood that now delays the evolution of production towards its socialisation, but also the lack of conscious perception of the evolution that has taken place and the unpreparedness of the workers themselves to put it into practice.

Losing the evolutionary thread of our thinking, we deviate in practice from our truly revolutionary tactics, we deviate from our direct tasks, we take part in the struggle for the seizure of power by the parties of statehood, albeit with reservations. *But our reservations do not reach the people; they see and judge by actions.* By this we indirectly strengthen the workers' faith in the possibility of a state renewal of the social order by mixing our banners with their banners, and by doing so we assume part of the responsibility for their mistakes, for the disastrous economic consequences of their tactics and for the blood shed.

How could the anarchists not have to answer for the sins of the Bolshevik statesmen before the people!

We must disassociate ourselves from the social utopias of all the Bolsheviks and their tactics of unrestrained violence and arbitrary power before it is too late.

II. On the revolutionary methods of some anarchists

Fascinated by the ephemeral success of the state socialists (Bolsheviks) among the workers and soldiers, some anarchists followed in their footsteps even in their methods of struggle, in revolutionary tactics. They did anarchism a disservice by mixing their supra-party doctrine with the practical manifestations of state socialism. They forgot that what is permissible for state socialists from their point of view, since they recognise power, is therefore oppression and arbitrariness, namely, arrests, personal and private searches, censorship in the crudest form, in the form of the suppression and closure of other people's press organs, the seizure of printing houses against the will of the printing workers themselves, etc. All these methods of struggle of the state parties in power or those seeking to seize power are a violation of the most basic principles of the anarchist doctrine; they destroy the fruits of the propaganda created at the cost of long and persistent efforts; they alienate the conscious strata of the people from our doctrine, because these tactical methods are too clearly at variance with the ethics of our doctrine.

For anarchy is not the doctrine of fanatical sectarians, of narrow dogmatists who destroy all dissenters, all dissenting thinkers, with fire and sword; anarchy is above all the freedom of the individual, bounded only by the *equal* freedom of another individual, whoever he may be by conviction; it is natural morality without sanction or compulsion.

The anarchist who raises his hand to search another person, even if only for weapons, is no longer a proud ideological anarchist; he is lower than the last policeman; at least he does not hide behind the banner of freedom. The anarchist who crosses the threshold of another's dwelling to

search it, even if only again for weapons, is a criminal against the high and pure doctrine which our ideological opponents consider unattainable.

The anarchist who destroys another's editorial office, however hostile, is no better than any crowned despot; they too have oppressed freedom of speech in the name of imaginary public interests. Such anarchists often attribute their inability to organise their own press, their mediocrity and helplessness solely to the material power of their opponents.

Why is it, then, that the works of our best teachers are so easily distributed that even weak anarchist groups publish them without a loss (but, unfortunately, not always presenting a public report on the proceeds from the publications, as is the custom of our West European comrades)?

Why do commercial enterprises, both abroad and in our country, willingly publish in different languages the basic works of our doctrine?

Why are strong organs of anarchist thought being established in Europe and America?

To destroy another's press, even the bourgeois press, with any other weapon than the pen, is in the face only of the statesmen and an offence against anarchism.

A peculiar technique for some of our Russian comrades became "seizures": seizure of printing houses, seizure of premises, etc.

But what ethics, what principles allowed you to break into a workshop that feeds, well or badly, dozens, maybe hundreds of workers and their families? And with no guarantee that you can feed them?

The seizure of premises, of the Dacha Durnovo... There was a time when, perhaps, sincere but limited ideologists thought of preaching theft as a means of struggle against private property, as partial expropriation. But it turned out to be possible to apply this to objects of personal use, not to instruments of collective production.

As a result, all professional thieves began to cover themselves with this "theory", and only then did the peculiar theorists fall silent and begin to dissociate themselves from them.

Now the theorists of "seizures" have arisen again — until gangs of hooligans and pogromists enter their camp — and only then will these theorists begin to dissociate themselves from them.

Expropriation is the main task of the social revolution. One can understand the haste of many young comrades to move from words to deeds. But it must be done in such a way as to achieve the goal and not the exact opposite result.

The expropriation of the capitalist's private property (not, of course, his private consumer goods, to which he is entitled on an equal footing with everyone else) means putting it into common use.

This act of social justice must be done thoughtfully, otherwise it will turn into its opposite, appropriation, i.e. embezzlement.

The present war has taught us how to do this; it has created special professional bodies, a whole new branch of public service, which can fulfil the aim of the social revolution with the greatest guarantees. These are the food authorities, which are called upon to evenly distribute edible food, clothing, and lodgings. If these organs are not always perfect, anarchists should endeavour with all their might to improve the production, to perfect the technique.

As for the poor, the incapacitated and the unemployed, here too we need organised social mutual aid, and not the method of "seizure" and distributing right and left, a method which in its essence resembles bourgeois *charity*. Our comrades in Kronstadt have already organised this work; there the incapacitated receive help at subsistence rates from their house committees, from the profitability of their houses. We should all take an example from them. The times of fruitless

sentimental speeches and lamentations about the fate of the poor are over; it is time to move on to the *organised* improvement of their situation. By arbitrary expropriations and seizures, we will give a chance to some people from time to time, and almost always not to the most needy.

But the worst of all is that by personal and group expropriations we will introduce moral decay into our own environment, legitimising arbitrariness and *personal discretion* in the absence of social control, and at the same time we will open wide the way to all kinds of unbalanced and criminal elements, these ugly and unhappy products of the outmoded capitalist system.

We are opposed to a war of conquest, we do not want any more slaughter of people, and some of us have joined with a light heart the fratricidal civil war started by one party of state-socialists to wrest power from the hands of the other.

They naively believed their crackling decrees; they succumbed to their ability to exploit social calamities, the darkness of the people, the black need, for party purposes; they imagined that wherever shots are fired there is a social revolution; they forgot that the true revolution is a school of freedom, not rampant arbitrariness and oppression of power.

The generations of our predecessors on the revolutionary path could not have allowed even the thought of such deviations from revolutionary ethics. But that was under autocracy, and now the leaders of the revolution in power have become autocrats themselves!

The general moral savagery caused by this long world war has affected the uncultured Russia more than any other country, and a certain part of Russian anarchists no less than the rest of society.

It is time for all of us anarchists to apply the weapon of criticism also to ourselves, it is high time that our actions and tactics should be strictly coordinated with the ethical principles of anarchism, with our ideals.

The bleeding, impoverished humanity is suffocating in the atmosphere of moral decay, it is poring after the extreme parties to quench its thirst for social justice.

The Russian people have begun to be disillusioned with their last passion, — state socialism — and already the breakthrough of the popular current towards anarchism is being noticed.

The winner in these days of universal thirst for justice will not be the one with the strongest nerves, i.e. *the morally obtuse*, but the one who is *morally superior and stronger*.

Will the anarchists find themselves at the height of their historical calling? Will they introduce into life, and above all into their tactics, the moral foundations of their doctrine? Or will the people, disillusioned with them as well, turn to the old reactionary but still established ways?

III. On organisation: federation or aggregation?

The question of organisation is a pitfall which has hardly been bypassed by the shuttle of the anarchist doctrine on its way from the realm of theoretical constructions to the world of living propaganda. Faced with the difficulties of this task, people who are impatient in their thinking sometimes completely abandon its solution and fall into misanthropic individualism, or they rush to compromise practical solutions.

Such compromise solutions include the organisations of so-called *federations of anarchist groups*.

The word “federation” is far from new in the anarchist movement. At the dissolution of the First International, in the early seventies, the anarchist movement was first represented by the

breakaway “*Jura Federation*”. But then it was a “federation” inherited from the International, which in one way or another recognised an elected leadership in its system of organisation.

As a consequence of this fundamental contradiction between anarchist theory and the practical side of its organisation, the Jura Federation soon disintegrated and the movement took the form of separate, often very unstable, independent groups, usually clustered around one or more comrades with a more developed personal initiative.

The groups multiplied, outwardly unrelated to each other, except for a common background of ideological direction.

From time to time, attempts were made to harmonise the activities of individual groups by calling “conferences” (congresses), but their practical results were negligible, since no binding resolutions could be adopted at them.

Just as the scientific congresses contributed little to science, because no binding resolutions were possible and science develops and grows through painstaking laboratory and office work, so too the anarchist congresses gave the comrades who came together an opportunity for personal communication and exchange of opinions, but that was all; they played no organisational role. The modern anarchist movement has grown and consolidated in its original groups.

The “federations of anarchist groups” that have recently appeared in Russia with their “federation councils”, in essence, repeat the outmoded past of the anarchist movement and show a complete failure of principle and tactics. These federations, from an external point of view, imitate the organisation of statist political parties with their “federation councils”, federation press, etc. But due to the contradiction between the external form and the ideological content of the anarchist doctrine, they are practically reduced to a fiction, to the appearance of an organisation, which under this form, in reality, does not exist.

Only this fiction can explain the appearance, on behalf of the “Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups”, of such a document as the “Manifesto” printed in No. 9 of “Anarchy”. Apart from a mass of risky theses, the “Manifesto”, in essence, preaches state-socialist organisation on *an all-Russian nationwide scale* and only tries to disguise this statist foundation by “unification from the bottom-up on federative principles”. This statist foundation (though it is called federative) is brought in the “Manifesto” to the organisation of “*external*” exchange by an All-Russian Labour Union, while the notion of “external” is inherent only in territorial statehood.

There is no doubt that this “Manifesto”, which pretends to be an expression of the ideas of a whole “federation of anarchist groups”, actually reflects someone’s personal ideas and not the programme of an entire organisation, if the latter is even remotely anarchistic.

Where there is no binding of general decrees, there can be no political organisation in the conventional sense of the word.

Without pretending to *win power* by election ballot or to seize it by conspiracy and physical violence, the anarchist movement has developed in civilised countries by the efforts of individuals and groups. These groups and individuals are essentially organised because they constitute an *ideological union* and a *practical intertwining of efforts* of separate homogeneous elements in a common structure, without any centre; they form not a federation but a kind of *aggregation*, if we may use, by similarity of construction, this scientific term.

There is no doubt that anarchist groupings, in order to strengthen the existing ties between them, should endeavour to multiply the ideological and practical threads that bind them. But for this purpose it is enough to have local or, more generally, regional meeting places where comrades can meet more often, exchange opinions and coordinate their actions. Anarchist clubs

are needed for this purpose and, in fact, organisations misnamed “federations of anarchist groups” play this role.

But in the recent development and expansion of the anarchist movement, there has come a period in which the publishing means of individual groups and factions can no longer enable ideas to be widely disseminated to the masses of people who are ready to receive them. In order to meet this urgent need, anarchists do not need to unite into federations, violating their principles or creating fictions. They should use the already tried and tested methods of co-operation and set up co-operative anarchist printers and publishers.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Alexander Atabekian
Questions of Theory and Practice
On Anarchist Literature, Tactics and Organisation
1918

Original translation of Вопросы теории и практики. Об анархистской литературе, тактике
и организации.

theanarchistlibrary.org