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Anarchism and the Question of Practice

Ba Jin

1927

Anarchism is a product of the mass movement, and can never divorce itself from practice. In fact, anarchism is not an idle dream that transcends time. It could not have emerged before the Industrial Revolution, and could not have developed before the french revolution. Many Chinese hold that Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu were China's first anarchists. This is very misleading. Taoism shares nothing with modern anarchism. The time of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu could not have produced the ideas of modern anarchism.

I think that many people have some misunderstanding of the doctrine of anarchism. It is true that anarchists are opposed to war, but the kind of war that anarchists are opposed to is the war resulting from the power struggle among warlords and politicians. We do support the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors, and the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, because it is a war for self-defence and liberty, which Malatesta considered to be "necessary and sacred." We also support the war of colonies against their metropolitan states and the war of the weaker nations

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against imperialist powers, although the goal of such wars is a little different from our ideal. Some people are opposed to class struggle, which, they argue, is contradictory to the happiness of all humanity. There was an article in the People's Voice (No. 33), which also reflected such a point of view. Anarchists are by no means opposed to class struggle, and actually advocate class struggle. Anarchism is the ideal and ideology of the exploited class .. .in the class struggle. It can be misleading simply to advocate seeking happiness for all humanity, as humanity is not a whole, and it was divided into two antagonistic classes long ago. "Anarchism has never been the ideal of the ruling class" (Kropotkin). "The real creator of anarchism is the revolutionary working class" (Aliz).

No practical problem can be more important than the problem of the Chinese revolution. It is the problem of the initiation of social revolution that occurs in our minds all the time. We are materialists ... We understand that the arrival of social revolution cannot be determined by our good wishes. It results from social evolution and is determined by the needs of history. Within the limits permitted by material conditions the effort of the individual may facilitate social evolution, but it is not the only factor in social evolution ...

There is no contradiction between revolution and evolution. Reclus said: "Evolution and revolution are the same phenomenon of a sequence of actions: evolution comes before revolution and develops into revolution." Anarchism cannot be realized in a very short period. Its success requires an accumulation of uninterrupted revolution and construction. Aliz made a good comment: "The realization of anarchism does not come all of a sudden. We have no way to fully realize the ideal of anarchism at one full stroke, and have to realize it step by step." It is impossible for us to fully realize the ideal of anarchism under China's current conditions. Our ideal, the ideal of future society, is a correct one. It is not an illusion, but its realization is limited by material conditions. In other words,

ment. This would certainly be a much better attitude than looking on unconcerned and making indiscreet criticisms.

attempt to build a dike to contain the revolutionary trend, we are doomed to be submerged ...

At present the revolution in China has gone beyond the aims of the Nationalist Party. For example, the peasants rise to overthrow local tyrants and evil gentry, peasants' associations everywhere make resistance against landlords, and workers organize labour unions to make resistance against capitalists. This is wonderful news .. ! believe that if we make ourselves a part of the revolutionary torrent, we will be able to create some new slogans such as "peasants' autonomy," "peasants' management of land," "abolition of foremanship." In time of turmoil and war we can burn down some county executive offices, or go to help the peasants organize communes to enable them to run their own affairs without the government's involvement. We should join the labour movement as workers, think about the concerns of our fellow workers and create new slogans, such as the reduction of working hours, protection of workers' means of living, and workers' education. Among the important issues in contemporary China, the priority should be advocating workers' rights to directly supervise all equipment in the factory, to abolish foremanship, and to negotiate with factory owners through the labour union. In regard to the slogan of taking over the factories by the workers, I think for the time being this is not feasible, although we can advocate it at an appropriate time. In practice our slogans must be relevant to the immediate concerns of the people ...

We can criticize the principles of the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party, but we should not denigrate them ... But, some people hold that we should join the Nationalist Party, to which I am strongly opposed.

In sum, if we throw ourselves into China's revolutionary torrent, although we are unable to fully realize anarchist society overnight, we may bring the Chinese people closer to the ideal of anarchism, and bring more anarchist influence to the move-

the ideal society will not suddenly appear like a miracle; it comes gradually. Every effort we make may speed up its arrival, but there are still limitations. This may not be as ideal as we wish, but this is a fact. If there is social revolution in China, we want to fully realize the ideal society of anarchism; but is it possible to practice the principle of from each according to his capacity and to each according to his needs when China's economy is underdeveloped, and daily necessities and even food still depend on imports from foreign countries? Under such conditions we have to make compromises. This does not mean that we have to accept failure. We do need to make some preparations before the revolution comes, and allow the workers to develop industry by means of cooperation. Even after the revolution starts, it will still be impossible for us to reach the ideal society of anarchism in a single bound. We have to move towards our ideal step by step ...

This is only a hypothesis about China's situation after the social revolution takes place, but we really don't know if it may happen in the near future. First, China's material conditions are not mature; second, the gap between Chinese anarchists and the masses is still very wide. Some anarchists are only interested in the propaganda of some principles among the people, but they never ask themselves if their propaganda is accessible to the people and what the people really want. How can we engage ourselves in the movement of workers without knowledge of their immediate concerns? It is hardly possible to ask them to wage a revolution with an empty stomach. It is true that social revolution may not occur in China immediately, but we should start our preparations and facilitate its inauguration ...

China has entered the era of revolution. Many of the revolutionary movements in China are not the movements of the Nationalist Party [Guomindang] but the movements of the people. Tens of thousands of workers are on strike, and numerous young people fight in the battlefields. Under the white terror

many people are devoting themselves to the revolution. They have not the slightest fear of jail or death. Some people say that those revolutionaries are misled by a small number of people, that their dream is wealth and power, that they are running dogs of new warlords, that they are loyal followers of the Three People's Principles [of the Nationalist Party]. and that they want to set up a bourgeois government. This is absolutely not true. It is true that there is a difference between the northern expedition of the Nationalist Army and China's revolutionary movement, the independent war of a semi-colonial country and the aim of anarchists, but we anarchists are not opposed to it and simply want to go even farther. Before we can abolish capitalism, we are by no means opposed to any kind of anti-imperialist movement. I hate Soviet Russia, but I hate imperialist powers even more; I hate the Nationalist Party, but I hate warlords even more. The reason is simple. Soviet Russia is not as evil as the imperialist powers, and the Nationalist Party and warlords are not jackals from the same lair. Certainly it would be wonderful if we could offer the people something better. It does not bother a bourgeois scholar to look on unconcerned and make empty talk in opposition, but to a revolutionary it is a crime. "Perfection or nothing" is the idea of an individualist, not the idea of a revolutionary who fights for the interests of the people, because such an idea does not reflect the needs of the people. If you have no means to bring "perfect" happiness to the people, how can you deny their opportunity to enjoy a slight portion of happiness? We should understand that this revolutionary movement is not monopolized by a particular political party. Without the participation and support of the people, how can those warlords be defeated? We anarchists did not play an influential role in the movement. This was our mistake. If we simply look on and denigrate this movement merely as a power struggle or war among warlords, and describe the Nationalist Party and Zhang Zoling [Manchurian warlord] as

jackals from the same lair, then those right-wing conservatives would certainly be very happy and say thanks to us!

... The propositions of the Nationalist Party are contradictory to ours, and in principle this party is our enemy. It is well known that the Nationalist Party wants to construct a good government, and we want to overthrow all kinds of government. Nevertheless, we have no objection to some causes such as the overthrow of warlords, and the overthrow of imperialism, but we want to move forward even further and reject the government of the Nationalist Party and its construction. (Several years ago when I put the slogan "self-reliance of the weaker nations to overthrow all imperialism" on the cover of the first issue of the People, some comrades in Wuchang and Hunan wrote letters against this slogan. They said that the slogan was superficial. Before the abolition of capitalism, they argued, to call for the overthrow of imperialism was to attend to trifles to the neglect of essentials. They also said that anarchists should not accept the idea that there were weaker nations in humanity. I don't agree with them. We do not deny the existence of weaker nations as a fact, but should weaker nations remain slaves of imperialist powers until the realization of anarchist society? Can colonies and semi-colonies never get independence before the abolition of capitalism?) Most of the common people agree with the Nationalist Party merely on some slogans, but disagree with it on many issues. At present the Nationalist Party is the leader of the people ... If we go to the people, throw ourselves into the revolutionary torrent, and lead the people to move towards a greater aim, then the people will naturally distance themselves from the Nationalist Party and follow us, which can bring more anarchist influence to the revolutionary movement, and make a deep impression of anarchism in the mind of the people. If we work in this way, although anarchist society may not be fully realized immediately, the people will move in this direction (at least better than the current situation). If we make an effort, we sow a seed; if we