

Letters to “l’en dehors”

Emma Goldman and Max Nettlau

1922

Vienna, July 22, 1922.

My dear friend,

... I am very happy to hear that your misfortunes have ended — at least until they want to strike again the spirit “en dehors” that you are. As for me, I vegetate here. My wayfaring bird’s wings are clipped by the exchange rate of foreign money. It is here where I am still the best, blending into the general misery, while elsewhere I would be a blot on the landscape. As for your request to join the list of your collaborators, do what you wish: your newspapers will always be expressions of independent thought and social protest, and it is a pleasure to know that a little oasis of this kind exists somewhere and that one thinks of you. That said, I do not know if I am “individualist” and I would say much the same about “being communist.” I am an anarchist pure and simple, “without label” according to the expression of Tarrida del Marmol. Even if it was worth it to imagine a truly anarchist society — how far we are from it!

I can say once against that there are men with whom I would like to live as a communist and other with regard to whom I would like to limit my relations to the most *voudrais vivre en communiste* et d’autres à l’égard desquels je voudrais limiter mes relations to the most “*tuckeriennement*” correct exchange; — as presently we have relations of cordiality and familiarity that are very different depending on the person.

I admire the freedom that one enjoys in a forest where one moves freely, or on the alpine meadows, or by drinking water from a fountain or a public well; if such a communism — “*prise au tas*” — was extended to a quantity of useful objects, that would please me and I would be willing to contribute to making this system possible by work freely provided. But I hate forced regulation, that other communism that we do not need to talk about. As for mutualism, the system of contracts and equal exchange, I understand that there is a quantity of articles of certain value, objects of choice, of a personal character, that can only be procured by individual transactions of one sort or another. But I would not want this to be extended to too many insignificant or indispensable objects, for the system of contracts is almost the regime of treaties; its present result is enough for me: it is the tomb of human solidarity; by the sanctions that any system of this kind would have, whatever its name, authority or would reappear or never disappear. So, I am — or rather I would be, “in anarchy” — at any time of day and on any occasion, for the kind of economic arrangement that seems to me the most practical or the least irksome, according to the

objects involved, the people, the circumstances, my own situation, etc. So I would be all kinds of things except orthodox anarchist, economically labeled ...

So I hope that you will be able to once again bring to fruition one of these periodicals that is your specialty, where anarchism, in the broadest sense of the term, and experimentalism will be at home. Just as, thus far, children are born as little ones and not as strapping youth two meters tall, it would be strange for this old world, so absurd and often so cruel, to bring to the world a mature anarchism: the idea of generalizing from the beginning a *defined* anarchist system is a source of great error. We can only create and generalize the freedom of experimentation. Let everyone then shows what they can do... I am sure that we agree on all these points.

Max Nettlau.

... September 29, 1922.

Dear friend,

I received, some time ago, a few lines from you. I had planned to write to you immediately, but so many things have happened since then that I did not do it. I will not wait any longer. I cannot tell you all the joy I feel at knowing you are finally delivered from the hell of prison. I do not know the conditions of existence in the prison where you were incarcerated, but from experience I know that all the prisons are hells made of "bricks of shame" where "men their brothers maim."¹

I am pleased to learn that you have started your work again. We have so few gifted, comrades! It has been a great loss to the movement that you have been imprisoned for so long.

... I am working at this moment on a book about Russia that must be finished by December. I cannot allow any other occupation to distract me from it. It is not only that I am committed to finishing this book within a certain period, it is because I am presently reliving the two terrible years passed in Russia. I am in such a frightful state of mind that most of the time it is only by simple force of will that I manage to remain standing... It is impossible for me to think of anything but Russia. When I have finished with my book, I will send you some articles for *l'en dehors*...

I see that your energy has not dropped off and I'm happy for it. I think my book will teach you a lot of things. although, to tell the truth, there is not a pen that can reproduce the spiritual and mental struggle that was the lot of those who neither wanted to nor could bring themselves to compromise. But I do my best to make this work on Russia as personal as possible; you will judge it by reading it. With things as they are now, there is not a European country that would support a foreigner actively engaged in anarchist propaganda. If I have been able to live quietly here, it's because I have devoted myself to purely literary works, outside any political or social activity... Since my departure from Russia I tried half a dozen countries. I was refused everywhere. You see my situation ... To return to Russia is to be exiled in some remote area ... and yet I have no desire to confine myself to inactivity for the rest of my life ...

Emma Goldman.

¹ The references is to Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol."

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