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Definition of anarchism

Federica Montseny

1931

Comrades and friends: The intelligent core of comrades organizing this Athenaeum has been kind enough to honor me by appointing me to explain what the anarchist ideal is to the good wills gathered on this evening of its inauguration.

The mission is certainly not easy. It would be, if I wanted to limit myself to a superficial definition of anarchism, to repeat the thousand overused topics that have been agreed to be considered a synthesis of anarchism. But I am ambitious. I intend, or wish, at least, to say something new or that the old things I say have a certain value of originality.

Furthermore, for some time now, perhaps when public opinion is better prepared to receive the anarchist seed, anarchism has been left without the voices and thoughts that one day managed to put it at the head of all human vanguard. I do not intend, because I know better than anyone the scope of my modest forces, to be that voice and that thought that brings the word and the ideal of anarchy to the heart of the multitudes and to the reason of the educated minorities, as never before attentive to all the movements of the human soul and as never before susceptible to receiving the projection of our ideas.

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It is not very far from the past when the anarchist idea had in Spain distinguished exponents, when, leaving the framework of the union and the meeting, it entered the official Athenaeums of Madrid and Barcelona, floated in the debates of the Congresses and, throughout the world, was at the head of literature and science.

We must not do, however, like the old believers and as Mella said: cry before the fallen idols and intone the eternal "Any time past was better."

Any time past was not better. If today anarchy lacks the intelligence that gave it scientific and philosophical value, if today we do not have a Reclus, a Kropotkin, a Tarrida, a Stackelberg, a Domela Nieuwenhuis, a Comelissen, a Mella, if today we have lost in intrinsic quality, we have gained in quantity and in that intimate quality of anonymous individual consciences, of slowly constructed personalities. Anarchism, ceasing to be the spiritual heritage of a select minority, begins to be the latent aspiration of the best of Humanity; the great dream, almost unformulated, of what we can call the flower of the multitudes. The reduced creed, the closed body of pure doctrine, is today the ideal of life of a part of humanity, the liberating, fraternitarian and just aspiration of a minority that is growing every day, more enlarged and more conscious every day.

I do not claim to be, I repeat, and returning to the starting point, that voice and that thought whose absence is noted, which would have to be the verb of anarchy penetrating, equally, into the soul of the people and of the intellectuality. But I cannot help trying, at this moment, to give my definition of anarchism as much breadth, as much grandeur, as much value of eternity as the anarchist idea itself contains, as a conception of man and of the future society.

There are too many misunderstandings surrounding our ideas, for us not to all strive to give its true moral physiognomy to anarchism, for us not to have the duty of exalting it in ourselves, as much in our words as in our lives.

The traditional enemies of the ideas of progress have been constantly trying to distort the character of anarchism. in distorting

But we must not localize, racialize the universality of anarchy; we must not make it the patrimony of a region, of a class, of a group of men, it, the future of all, the grandiose concretion, the summit of human progress; To her, who proclaims the homeland of all men and who from one end of the world to the other, above all borders, from country to country, from continent to continent, perhaps tomorrow from star to star, links the fraternal hands of all creatures.

Comrades and friends! With what joy, with what hope and excitement we must all attend the inauguration of this Libertarian Athenaeum, the first of its kind in Barcelona and whose example must be followed by all the towns of Spain and by all the districts of the great capitals!

The work of dissemination, the work of teaching and individual and collective training that these Athenaeums can carry out, that these Athenaeums must carry out, is great. They will be the cell of a cultural organization for the people and for all men, a kind of universities, of popular chairs and forums, where the ideological training of young people and women will begin.

They must be all of this, we must all strive to make them so, so that the Athenaeums multiply and be the most beautiful means, the most active procedure for carrying out that sowing of the anarchist seed, already fertilized with so much blood and so many tears, with the martyrdom of so many victims and with the sacrifice of so many heroes, and on whose provident harvest, on whose fruits, embodied in reality, the destiny of men and the transformation of society depend.

We have before our eyes, before our souls, before our lives, a great ideal to love, a great cause to serve, a great tomorrow to forge.

Because every present is the child of a past and the father of a future. We, now, in our humility and in our modesty, must be, we must be the forgers, the engenderers of this tomorrow of our children, the tomorrow of the generations that will succeed us in progress and in time.

A parenthesis of relative freedom has opened in the social life of Spain. We are not denied the right to express our ideas, nor are our voices stifled, when we explain to men what anarchism is and what it wants. And we must take advantage of this margin of freedom, this basic right, which no democracy can deny, however much it may deny itself, to sow in the hearts of the people, in the conscience of men, the seed of the anarchist idea, the ideal of love, of fraternity, of independence, which raises man above himself and places him in the midst of the mother earth, cradle and heritage of all men, basing on it, the synthesis and summit of all creation, the end and the beginning of social life.

Catalonia, whose children have embodied, from age to age, the spirit of rebellion and protest in the history of Spain; Catalonia, whose own racial foundations cement the idea of freedom, of the individuality of man, dedicated to work, and not to war; born for the arts and sciences of peace; Catalonia, which was already, in its origins, the expression of an instinctive, almost vital individualism, of which its past, its origin, its antiquity, its geographical constitution, based on farmhouses, on the mountains, open fields, and on the sea, horizon of adventure, are the expression; Catalonia, of whose children an eminent poet, Maragall, said that each one carried an anarchist within; Catalonia, I repeat once again, how splendid, how beautiful, what a unique land it is for this sowing! In Spain, there is another as good, as rich as it: Andalusia, the martyr and generous, capable of all romantic enthusiasms, the one that listens to no other voice than that of the heart and loves only causes devoid of materiality.

their ideas and constantly presenting anarchists as the antithesis of what we are, in ourselves and in our ideas.

And the sad thing about this is that we must admit that, on some occasions and in some individuals who have called themselves anarchists without being so, being morally incapable of being so, this monstrous and dishonorable legend, woven around us by the enemies of anarchy, has found support in reality. And this is one of the many things that must be fought and avoided.

What is anarchism?

Should we go back to the origin of the word and the idea, to its beginnings, from the time when the first foundation of it was formulated, from the time when the words anarchy and anarchists were first uttered?

Before old Proudhon used it as an expression for a society without government, the word Anarchy was already heard in the middle of the Convention, directed against the two great groups that represented the extreme left in that revolutionary parliament, formed to direct the revolution and which ended up being the antechamber of the guillotine. The anarchists, in the French revolution, were Babeuf and Hebert, the comrades of the Republic of Equals, and, above all, that man, solitary and great, who fills with his pure name the whole revolutionary period: Anarchasis Cloutz, the Orator of the Human Race, the first assassinated by the betrayed revolution, the first victim of Moloch, of the revolutionary Saturn, who devoured his own children. The figure of Cloutz, Robespierre's greatest victim, symbolizes and embodies the eternal tragedy of a man who is ahead of his time, superior to his time, whose ideas surpass the dominant ideas of his time, whose thought leaves all other thoughts behind and who is brought back to the uniform rank of the human herd, to the swine-like trot of the majority, by means of persecution and death.

Clootz, Babeuf and Hebert were the anarchists of the French Revolution, those who were too far ahead and were therefore the first victims of the revolution, the first heads cut off by the guillotine. The implacable law of universal progress, the strange logic of this leapfrogging advance which forms evolution and constitutes the great drama of human destiny!

Even before Proudhon pronounced the word anarchy, in parallel with old Godwin, Coeurderoy and Dejacques, pioneers of the human spirit, the word anarchists was pronounced in Spain, at the beginning of the last century, in the midst of the reign of Ferdinand VII the Sinister, during the constitutionalist period, in the days of the Exterminating Angel and the torture of Mariana Pineda. It was in the trial initiated against that unfortunate woman, murdered by the courts of the thousand times cursed Ferdinand, for the great crime of having embroidered a flag for the liberals, where we read the word anarchists directed against Torrijos's companions, against those who supported him and some of whom followed him to the grave.

It is not necessary to say that these anarchists had nothing to do with anarchy: constitutionalist liberals. In the fight against a tyrant and against an absolute monarchy, their postulates have already been surpassed by the Spanish monarchy itself. But, like the anarchists of the French Revolution, they also represented the force of progress and rebellion, the idea — he still stammered — of militant freedom; they assumed, in the eyes of the society of their time, the revolutionary, threatening character that the anarchists have assumed, assume and will assume forever.

It is only with Proudhon and Bakunin that the idea takes shape and becomes consolidated, that the idea takes on character and form, that it expresses its statements and becomes a body of doctrine, at once revolutionary and constructive. It attacks equally the political State, the dominion of some men over other men, and the idea of Authority, the moral principle created to base the accomplished fact of this dominion. It attacks equally the powers of a

spirit of sacrifice, greatness of soul, generous and total dedication of life to the idea, which is not compatible with any ambition or with any leadership, because they do not fit among men conscious of themselves, anarchism, I repeat, is, for all this, distorted, fought by those who see in it, in the erection of the human soul over itself that it represents, a threat to their interests and to their ambitions.

The instinct of self-preservation of the powerful, whose interests and dominion are threatened; the instinct of self-preservation of those who also aspire to possess and dominate, in the name of Democracy as well as Autocracy, of Communism as well as Socialism, all this conspires against us, fighting us with all weapons, distorting our ideas and our actions, slandering our men.

Even those actions that anarchism has carried out through its own men, assuming, at certain moments, the expression of protest and human justice, have been used by our enemies to present us as destroyers, as a negative force before the people and humanity in general. But human instinct is so intelligent that this unworthy maneuver has not worked. The world knew how to understand, knows how to understand how the names of Angiolillo, avenger of the martyrs of Montjuich; of Bresci, avenger of the victims of Milan; of Kurt Wilckens, depositary of the blood of 40,000 proletarians murdered in Argentine Patagonia by Lieutenant Colonel Varela; of Schirru, the ill-fated Harmodio of the thousand times damned Mussolini, as he knows what was and is the life of purity, of quiet self-denial, the heart and the thought of the Bakunins, the Kropotkins, the Reclus, the Lorenzos, the Nettlaus, the Faures, the Luisa Michels and Teresa Claramunts, of all those who have been the enrichers, the apostles, the heroes and the martyrs of our cause, of the cause of all the oppressed, of all the men of the earth.

Comrades and friends:

I have tried to define briefly. Anarchism is not, as some believe, a destructive idea, the heritage of pathological types, as Lombroso wanted to demonstrate, nor of deluded dreamers, outside of reality, as many say now. Anarchism, as an ideal of life, is a social organization perfectly realizable today. And as a moral concretization, as a synthesis and summit of human aspirations, of the spiritual progress of Humanity, as an unlimited and definitive ideal, for the same reason that it is and will be eternally open to all the dreams of men, to all enrichments, to all nuances and to all innovations; as a synthesis and summit, it is at the end of all ideas, it is the multiple goal of a thousand paths.

The State Communists, who fight us so much, have said and repeated, through the mouths of all their theoreticians, that they want to seize power, in order, after a prudential bridge of years, to destroy it and go to the constitution of a society without government, to anarchy. Democracy and socialism, they have maintained and maintain, through the mouths of all their theoreticians, that, faithful to their evolutionary theories, they tend every day to less government, until they reach self-government, that is, to the government of each person over himself, and to the annulment of public power. And even the same reactionaries, the same conservatives, the same partisans of the State, assumed in the hands of an autocrat, do not oppose ideal reasons to our conceptions. They declare them impossible, because of human nature, which will not be able to do without, according to them, for a long time, human and divine laws that direct and repress it.

But, for that powerful reason of the vested interests of all the powers and all the parties, parties and powers that need the ignorance and submission of the masses to continue dominating men and living at their expense; for that universal law of ambition, of the ancestral tendency to dominate, for the coarse depth of the soul of those who aspire to govern and of those who lend themselves to being shepherds of flocks, leaders of the multitude, anarchism, which nullifies all this, which does without all this, which needs a

human character, constituted on this fact and this principle, and the powers of a divine character, created to legitimize and consolidate material Power, by means of the idea of divinity, administered by priests. Bakunin wrote his "God and the State", an indictment against the two forms of tyranny over men, religious and political, which has not yet been overcome. Proudhon uttered the famous phrase: "Property is theft", which shows the disinherited of the world the ignominy of the plunder perpetrated by the strongest and boldest, to the detriment of the weak and the timid.

But before arriving at these two public manifestations, these two general consolidations of anarchy, as a social protest and as a human ideal, a slow philosophical process was necessary; the entire epic of human effort was necessary, against ignorance, tyranny and injustice, milestones of which were, at the end of antiquity, Spartacus and his rebellious slaves; at the beginning of the Christian era, Jesus and his fraternity theories; in the middle of the night of the Middle Ages, the speculations of Free Examination, the social utopias of Thomas More, Campanella and Savonarola; the martyrdom of science, which faced the closed principle of religion and dared to discover universal dynamism, in Galileo; the circulation of blood, in Servetus; the contradictions of the Old and New Testament, in Abelard and Giordano Bruno; in the awakening of that dark and bloody night, the Renaissance, return to the eternal principles of life and beauty; in the beginning of the contemporary era, the Encyclopedia, the French Revolution, proclaiming the rights of man; the magnificent blossoming of young German philosophy, from whose sister sources the two introducers of the anarchist idea in Spain drew: Pi y Margall, translator of Proudhon and disciple of Herder, and Bakunin, theoretician and practitioner of anarchism, who interpreted Hegel's ideas in a libertarian sense.

For those who contemplate, with an objective gaze, from afar and as a spectator, this slow and majestic edifice of human progress; To anyone who sees, one by one and all in one, the grandiose details of the grandiose whole, what a marvellous view

the panorama of history offers! What a lesson in tenacity, patience and optimism it gives us! How constant has been the progress, the consequences mathematically calculated, the end foreseen in advance, the transition from one step to another smooth and continuous, the connection between an idea that was being realized and the new idea that was being born incessant!

We are now in the full moral vitality of anarchy. The ideal has already been formulated; its own process has begun; we have already seen its gradual evolution. From the simple and ungenerous collectivist formula: To each according to his strength, we have passed to the more generous libertarian communist formula: To each according to his strength and to each according to his needs. The unitary, almost rudimentary conception of future society, conceived as a return to the original freedom of Nature, but still conceiving man as multitudinous, as great masses, collectively, is beginning to be succeeded by the individualized conception of man, the vision of Humanity, dissolved into individuals: Man, Nature becoming conscious of itself, according to Reclus; Man, the cell of the whole social structure, god, sovereign, law, beginning and end of itself, according to Pi y Margall; Man, a philosophical and living being, confronted with Humanity, according to Ibsen, Nietzsche and Max Stirner, the five creators of individualism, of our own individualism, of an individualism that has nothing to do with bourgeois individualism, nor with that other pseudo-anarchist individualism, based not on the exaltation of individual values, not on the affirmation of man as man, not on human potential, considered individually, but based on individual selfishness, on meanness, on the pettiness of a small and cowardly vision of man and life.

It is anarchism, as it is today, enriched by multiple thoughts, by the natural progress of ideas, by that intimate richness that the

blood of heroes and martyrs gives to ideals, which I will try to define.

Anarchism, an ideal without limits, an ideal that opens to man the doors of tomorrow infinitely, an ideal that does not close itself within the circle of a program, within a table of demands, can be defined thus: It is an ideal that says to man: You are free. By the mere fact of being a man, no one has the right to lay hands on you. There is no force above your strength. You are the lord and god of yourself. Associate, join freely with your fellow men, for that which you cannot achieve alone; organize your free life, dispensing with gods and masters, with dominions and privileges created and sustained by the strongest to the detriment of the weakest. Destroy the State, the cause and effect of all tyranny, and push aside as useless the idea of God, destroyed by science, the daughter only of ignorance, of human terror in the face of natural phenomena. Put the earth, the heritage of all men, in the hands of all men. Property, theft carried out by the strong and brutal of a time, to the detriment of the weaker, is an immorality condemned by all natural laws. Everything belongs to everyone. Everything you need is yours, and your need and your freedom to take must have no other limit than the need and freedom to take of your fellow men. You yourself must be a free and strong man, respectful and generous by reason of your freedom and your strength, who must establish, between you and your neighbor, your brother, your fellow man, the spontaneous laws of coexistence, of mutual aid, of affinity and of respect necessary so that the future society, without laws or civil guards to enforce those laws, will be a harmonious whole, based on peace and the order of work and freedom.

But our definition today, the constant advance of the idea, which does not close, which advances in step with the aspirations of men and the achievements of science, may tomorrow be outdated or small.

However, there is in anarchism that general basis, that principle of an infinite end, which can be defined in a few words and which