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Questions of Tactics

Fernando Tarrida del Mármol

1890

We have received the following letter from one of our comrades at *El Productor* of Barcelona. It seems good to reproduce it, for, aside from a few errors of judgment, it contains advice worth considering, and, in the response that we expect to make to our friends in Spain, if we manage to find and demonstrate the causes of the disorganization of the anarchists, the cause of the inconsistency of the groups and their inactivity, we could find there the remedy and some indications of the tactics to follow:

Barcelona, August 7, 1890.

Comrades of La Révolte,

I would like to clearly explain the idea that I have of the revolutionary tactics of the French anarchists. That is why, being unable to write a series of articles, as one might, I am writing you a personal letter. You will draw from it whatever good it contains.

Revolutionary decisiveness has never been lacking in the French character, and the anarchists have demonstrated it all

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sorts of circumstances that they lack neither agitators nor revolutionaries. The number of adherents is great enough and [yet]... with some great thinkers, some dedicated agitators, some enthusiastic disciples, France, we must admit, is the country that produces the fewest important acts for anarchy. That is my nightmare. That is why I have said that I believe that your revolutionary tactics are not good. Nothing fundamental divides the French and Spanish anarchy, and yet, in practice, we find ourselves widely separated.

We all accept Anarchy as the integration of all liberties, and as their sole guarantee; as the impetus and sum of human well-being. No laws, no repressions; spontaneous, natural development of all acts. No superiors, nor inferiors, nor governments, no governed; only conscious beings who seek one another, who attract one another, who discuss, resolve, and produce together, who love one another without any other aim but the well-being of all. This is how we all understand Anarchy, how we conceive of the society of the future; and it is towards the realization of the conception that we all labor. Where are our differences?

I my opinion, enraptured by the contemplation of the ideal, you have drawn up for yourselves a line of ideal conduct, an unproductive puritanism in which you squander a great deal of your strength, which could destroy the strongest organisms and which, thus badly used, produce nothing at all. You forget that you are not surrounded by free beings, possessive of their liberty and dignity, but by slaves who wait *for someone to save them*. You forget that our enemies are organized and strive every day to strengthen themselves more so that they can continue to rule. You forget, finally, that even those who work for good live in the present social disorganization and are full of vices and prejudices.

As a result, you accept an absolute liberty and you expect everything from individual initiative, pushed to such a point that no pact or understanding is possible. No agreements, no

My all to you and to the Social Revolution.

meetings at which revolutions are made; the important, the essential things is that *everyone does as they please*.

The result: someone wants to do something good, but there is no means of gathering with all those who think like them in order to explain their initiative, to gain advice and assistance; they are obliged to proceed alone or not to proceed at all.

To create commissions for administrative work, to set contributions in order to accomplish some necessary task—this is an *imposition*. And in this way, if a comrade or group wants to enter into relations with all the anarchists of France, or of the world, for some private aim, they is no means and they must renounce the idea. Anything that is not the Social Revolution is a stupidity; what is it to the anarchists if wages become more inadequate, if the workday is increased, if the workers are insulted in the workshops, or if the women are prostituted by the bosses? As long as the bourgeois regime endures, all that will endure and it is only necessary to concern ourselves with the final goal—meanwhile, the mass of proletarians, who suffer and do not believe in an imminent deliverance, do not listen to the anarchists.

I could continue in this way, piling up example, and the result would always be the same: powerlessness. Powerlessness, not because they lack elements, but because they find themselves scattered, with no link between them.

In Spain, we pursue completely different tactics; certainly for you this will be a heresy worthy of the most complete excommunications, a false practice that must be dismissed from the field of anarchist action, and, yet, we believe that only in this way could we make our ideas enter in among the proletariat and destroy the bourgeois world. We cling, just like you, to the purity of the anarchist program. There is nothing as intransigent, as categorical as the Ideas, and we accept neither compromises, nor attenuation of any sort. For that, we strive in our writings to be as clear, as explicit as we can. Anarchy is our true north; it is the point that we want to reach and to-

wards which we direct our advance. But there are all sorts of obstacles on our path and to overcome them we use the means we think best. If we cannot adapt our conduct to our ideas, we note the fact and attempt to come as close as possible to the ideal. We do as a traveler would who wanted to go to a country in a temperate climate, but who, in order to arrive there, must pass through tropics and glacial zones: they would furnish themselves with heavy blankets and very light clothing, which they would cast aside when they arrived. It would be stupid, ridiculous even, to want to fight with your fists against a well-armed and armored enemy.

Our tactics follow from what I have said. We are anarchists; we preach Anarchy without adjectives. Anarchy is an axiom; the economic question is a secondary matter. It will be said that it is through the economic question that Anarchy is a truth; but we believe that to be anarchist means to be the enemy of all authority, of every imposition, and consequently, whatever system we recommend, it is because we believe it is the best defense for Anarchy, and we have no desire at all to impose it on those who do not accept it.

This does not mean that we set aside discussion on economic questions. On the contrary, we love to discuss them, but only in order to bring new data for the definitive solution or solutions. Some very good things have been said by Cabet, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Robert Owen and the others; but all their systems have disappeared, because they wanted to lock away society with the conceptions of their brains; they have, however, done a great deal of good clarifying the question.

Note it well: from the moment that you propose to give the general lines of the future society, from the one side the objections and demands of adversaries, and from the other the natural desire to make a complete, perfect work, will lead us to invent, to sketch out a system that, you can be certain, will disappear like the others.

merchants, without any of the members regarding cooperation as the final aim, but only as a means from which they can profit. Some of these societies make large purchases and have a credit of 50 or 60 thousand francs, and have been of great use during strikes giving credit to the workers. In the athenaeums of the *gentlemen*—of the *savants*, as they are called—socialism is debated; two of our comrades go then to sign up as members (if they have no money, the association gives it to them) and go there to uphold our ideas.

Our press does the same thing. It never neglects anarchist ideas, but it makes space for manifestos, communications and news, which, although it could appear unimportant, serve however to make our newspapers and our ideas reach into towns or other places where they are not known. That is our tactic, and I believe that if it was adopted in other regions the anarchists would then see their field of action expand.

Consider that in Spain the majority does not know how to read and yet we publish six anarchist newspapers, and a large number pamphlets, books and broadsheets. We constantly have meetings and, without having true agitators, very important acts are performed.

In Spain, the bourgeoisie is heartless and bitter, and will not tolerate anyone from their class sympathizing with us, and when some well-placed or intelligent man places himself on our side, they force him to abandon us, so that he can only help us in private. On the contrary, the bourgeoisie will give him everything he desires, if he will distance himself from us. So all the work in favor of anarchy remains the responsibility of the manual laborers who must find the time during their hours of repose.

If we changed tactics in France, England, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium and North America, where they are a large number of good elements, what progress we could make!

I believe that I have said enough to make my ideas understood.

them free to their members; they are the ones who give money to sustain our publications, or to help the prisoners and the persecuted. We show by our conduct in these societies that we struggle from love of our ideas; besides, we mix in everywhere there are workers and even where there are none, when we believe that our presence can be useful to the cause of anarchy. This is why in Catalonia (and now this also begins in other regions of Spain) there is not a village where we have not created, or at least assisted, associations under the names of circles, athenaeums and worker centers, which, without calling themselves anarchist and without really being anarchist, sympathize with our ideas. We give purely anarchist conferences and mix our revolutionary work with the musical and literary gatherings. There, seated at a table in the cafe, we discuss, we see each other every evening; or we study in the library.

There we establish the editorial staffs of our newspapers, and the papers that come in exchange go into the reading room and all with a free organization, almost without expenses. For example, in the circle of Barcelona one is not even obliged to be a member; those are who wish to be, and the dues of 25 [cents] per month is also voluntary. Of two or three thousand workers who come to the premises of the circle, only 300 are members. It could maintain that these premises are the hotbeds of our ideas; and yet while the government has always sought pretexts to close them, they have never found any, since they do not call themselves anarchist and that is not where we hold the private meetings. There we do nothing that we would not do in any public cafe; but because all the active elements come there, great things often also emerge, and that without formalities, while drinking a cup of coffee or glass of cognac.

Nor do we neglect the cooperative societies for consumption. In nearly all the town of Catalonia, save Barcelona, where it is impossible because of the great distances and the way of life,—consumer cooperatives have been created where the workers find food of better quality at better prices than at other

From the anarchist individualism and other Spencer and other *bourgeois* thinkers—if you'll pardon the expression—to the *socialist* anarchist-individualists—I find no other adequate expression—there is a great distance, as there is between the Spanish collectivists and those of another region; as there is between the English and American mutualists; as there is among the communists.

Kropotkin, for example, speaks to us of the *industrial village*, reducing his system, his conception, if you wish, to a gathering of little communities that produce what they want, realizing so to speak the biblical fiction of the terrestrial paradise with the progress of civilization added, while Malatesta, who is also an anarchist-communist, would recommend the establishment of large organizations that exchange products among themselves and increase still more that creative power, that astonishing power exerted by the nineteenth century, purged of all harmful action.

Each powerful intelligence announces, creates new paths forward for the future society, and will create disciples by hypnotic force—if we can put it that way—suggesting to others' brains their own ideas—and all in general we make out our own individual plan

Let us agree then, as we have all done in Spain, to simply call ourselves anarchists. In our conversations, in our letters, in our speeches, in our journalism, let us discuss the economic questions, but these questions should never be a cause of division among anarchists.

In order for our propaganda to succeed, for the preservation of the idea, we need to know and see each other, and for that we must establish groups. In Spain there are groups in nearly all the localities where there are anarchists and they are the driving force of every revolutionary movement. The anarchists do not have money or easy means to obtain it; as a precaution against that the majority among us have imposed on themselves a small weekly or monthly contribution; in this

way we can maintain the necessary relations among all the associates, and we could maintain relations with the whole world, if the other regions had an organization like our own.

There is no authority in the group; we choose on comrade as a treasurer, another as a secretary to receive correspondence, etc., etc. We ordinarily hold meetings every week or every fortnight, with extraordinary meetings whenever they are required. To spare costs and labor, and also as a prudent measure in case of persecution, we agree on the creation of a *commission de relations* for the region. That commission has no initiative: those who make up the commission must apply to their group if they want to make proposals. Its mission is to make known to all the groups the proposals and resolutions that have been communicated to it by a group, to account for all the addresses communicated to it and send them to the groups that ask for them, in order to establish direct relations with other groups.

Those are the general lines of the organization, which were agreed upon at the Valencia congress and of which you have spoken in *La Révolte*. The good that it produces is immense; it is what fans the flames of anarchist ideas; but, you may be certain, if we reduced our action to anarchist organization, we would accomplish very little. We would end up transforming an organization of thinkers that discuss ideas, which would surely degenerate into an organization of metaphysicians who discuss words. Some, and even much, of that has happened to you. Not being engaged in any activity but a discussion of the ideal, you fall into a debate over words. Some call themselves *egoists*, and the others *altruists*, but they mean the same thing; these call themselves *communists*, and those *individualists*, but at base they have the same ideas.

We must remember that the great mass of proletarians is forced to work an excessive number of hours, that it is in the greatest poverty and consequently they cannot buy the books of Letourneau, Büchner, Darwin, Spencer, Lombroso, Max Nor-

dau, etc., whose names they hardly know. And even if the proletarian could procure the books, he lacks the preparatory studies in physics, chemistry, natural history and mathematics necessary to comprehend well what he reads; he lacks the time to study methodically, nor is his brain sufficiently exercised to assimilate these studies well. There are exceptions, like that of Etienne in *Germinal*; made *hungry for knowledge*, they devour everything that falls into their hands, but retain very little of it.

So our field of action is not in the heart of these groups, but in the midst of the proletarian masses.

It is in the *sociétés de résistance* that we study and prepare our battle plan. These societies will exist as long as the bourgeois regime endures. The workers, who are not writers, are unconcerned whether or not they have freedom of the press; the workers, who are not orators, do not concern themselves much with the freedom of public gatherings; they consider political liberties secondary things, but all desire to improve their economic conditions, and all wish to shake off the yoke of the bourgeoisie; for that reason, there will be labor unions and societies of resistance as long as there is exploitation of man by man. Our place is there. By neglecting them, as you have done, they become the rendezvous for pleasure-seekers who speak to the workers of *scientific* socialism, or patricism, or possibilism, or cooperation, or of amassing capital in order to sustain peaceful strikes, or of demanding the aid and support of the authorities, always pacify them and curb the revolutionary urge. If the anarchists were in these societies, at least they would prevent the pacifiers from spreading propaganda against us. And if the anarchists have been found, as in Spain, to be the most active members of the society as well, to be those who do all the necessary work without payment, just the opposite of the false defenders who exploit them, then these societies will always be on our side. In Spain they are the ones who, every week, buy quantities of anarchist newspapers to distribute