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Libertarian Socialist! Why?

Gaston Leval

1956

For the series of publications that he envisions, Louis Louvet has asked me to write about the aims of the Libertarian Socialist Group and the movement that we are striving to establish. I begin this work by noting that I necessarily orient my presentation by taking into account the fact that it is destined for *Contre-courant* and for readers primarily of free minds. Not, you will understand, to adapt my thought or its development to the taste of my readers, in order to attract them with skillful concessions, but because every social doctrine that is not an collection of limited, evangelistic precepts encompasses a great number of problems, and inevitably those who propagates it must set out the aspects of it that relate to the thought and to the uncertainties of those to whom it is addressed.

Those who want additional information will find it in our *Manifeste socialiste libertaire*, in our monthly *Cahiers* or in other writings that will appear as soon as we find the necessary support. LET US EXPLAIN OURSELVES first regarding our method of thought. It has happened to socialism, like anarchism, communism, syndicalism, cooperativism what, in a sense, has happened to all the great philosophical, religious, political, sociological schools that have been subject to contact

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with men and the life of collectivities. Seemingly, they are enriched by innumerable secondary and complementary additions.

Christianity, which has a body of doctrine that is simple enough, has given birth to different schools that all call themselves by its name: official and orthodox Catholicism, Calvinist and Lutheran Protestantism, sects of Mormons, Anabaptists, Camisards, Albigensians, Waldensians, puritans and how many others! All of these branches derive from Christianity. All of that has enriched it in appearance but impoverished it in reality. The numerous sects and their modes of thought, so often contradictory and hostile, have stifled, swamped primitive Christianity in the sense of human fraternity, of social justice and even of religious practice. There remains only the myth, especially the supreme myth, for the secondary myths are variously interpreted, and it is on that interpretation that the wars of religion are engaged. It is always the case that, even while calling themselves by the name of Christianity, the different so-called Christian families have distorted it in its essence.

It is the same with republicanism. It is enough to see all the schools that have been established, and the very different political regimes that claim the name in order to realize it.

It is just the same for syndicalism. Revolutionary in its beginnings, pursuing the disappearance of capitalism and the State, promoting the establishment of a society of producers made and directed by the producers themselves, it has been "enriched" with new contributions that have soon submerged and, in the final accounting, impoverished it.

Thus the present cooperation, which no longer bears any resemblance to the conceptions of Robert Owen, the program of the Rochdale Pioneers or that of the Ecole de Nîmes. But let us not get lost in the similar comparisons that concern the other schools. Let us come directly to that which concerns anarchism, since it must be especially a question of that tendency.

The author of these same lines has campaigned in the international anarchist movement for forty-five years. He has written enough, spoken enough, struggled enough, paid enough with his person, supported enough, even in the theoretical domain,—often under pseudonyms—more in Spanish than in French, to leave no doubt of the firmness of his convictions. However, he considers that, in a country like France, it is preferable to adopt the denomination of libertarian socialism in order to define the social ideas that he propagates, and those who campaign with him have reached the same conclusions. Let us note that the same thing occurs in Germany, in Switzerland, that we find groups of libertarian socialists in Argentina and that the intellectual personality having the most stature since the death of Kropotkin, Rudolph Rocker, has reached the same conclusions.

I would add that according to Max Nettlau, who often opposed libertarian socialism, which was for him a synonym of social anarchism, to authoritarian socialism, Francisco Ferrer and Tarrida del Marmol—the latter an astronomer and mathematician, and one of the most striking intellectual figures of Spanish anarchism—had come, from 1909, to the conclusion that those who interpreted anarchism in their manner should call themselves libertarian socialists.

Errico Malatesta also wrote in one of his articles—and Luigi Fabbri confirmed in his book *Il Pensamiento de Malatesta*—that he had generally preferred to call himself “anarchist socialist”¹. Gustav Landauer, who was after Rocker the most figure intellectual figure in German anarchism, and who was Proudhonian, called himself socialist and his essential book bore the title: *Incitation au socialisme*. If we go back farther, we see that Bakunin had generally called himself a revolutionary so-

¹ In order to know the sense of the terms that we are in the habit of using, there is no difference between anarchist socialism and libertarian socialism.

cialist, that he had defended and promoted socialism, that he had founded the Alliance of the Socialist Democracy, starting point of international anarchism, then, before the electoral and statist deviation of German social-democracy, the Revolutionary Socialist Alliance. In general, the word “anarchy” had for him the sense of destruction and chaos, and when he called himself an anarchist or invoked anarchy, it was as a demolisher, and only for the destruction of the institutions of oppression and exploitation of man by man. His reconstructive theories were socialist. Whoever will take the trouble to read him carefully will be convinced of it.

Moreover, his friends in the First International also defended socialism. It is also curious to note that it was the men such as Jules Guesde, Paul Brousse, Benoît Malon who in their anti-Marxist verbal extremism, almost unilaterally called themselves anarchists and then would found the authoritarian socialist party. If we go back to the “father of anarchy,” we will not find an identical fact. It was in 1840, in his book *What is Property?* that P.-J. Proudhon launched the word anarchy in order to define a new social doctrine, an anti-authoritarian conception of socialism. That struck as great a blow as his lapidary formula: “Property is theft.” For in France, the word had been used, for three centuries, in the pejorative sense that we recognize.

Proudhon, moreover, recognized himself in these few lines, that it seems useful to us to cite fully, where he affirmed that he was an anarchist. Here is its text: “Property and royalty have been in the process of demolition since the world began: as man seeks justice in equality, society seeks order in anarchy. Anarchy (in italic characters in the texts), absence of master, of sovereign, such is the form of government that we approach every day, and that the ingrained habit of taking the man for the rule and his will for law makes us regard as the height of disorder and the expression of chaos. “ (*Qu’est-ce que la propriété? ou Recherches sur le principe du droit et du gouvernement.*

tions forged in the millennia, underway toward the millennia. So we want to constitute a minority that will be an elite to the extent that these high reasons act to inspire it, to the degree also that, which being conscious of its responsibilities as an elite, it will simply do its duty, without vanity, without pride, moved by that mystique of history that has inspired other minorities before it, and that will inspire others after it.

It remains to say, in this short work, why we do not believe we should advise armed revolution, nor believe the triumph of that revolution is possible. It would remain to recommend certain other things. The space is lacking to do so. That will be the subject of another writing, which will appear in this collection, or elsewhere.

or unverified, and of all factional prejudices. And we do not want to make concessions to anyone. Not even to the believe in the superiority of the people, which was that of Kropotkin and other theorists.

We are for the people first of all, and certain among us are part of them, with that struggle for life and the insecurity of tomorrow that are ours in many cases. But we know that the human condition is generally the same, that the worker who lives better than the petit-bourgeois of the beginning of the century is hardly better, speaking in human terms, and is indifferent to the fate of those who live less well.

We know that there are wage-earners with the mentality of social climbers and *nouveaux riches*, and that the improvement of the material condition of men rarely implies the improvement of their moral condition.

Once more we return to ethics, to the preeminence of individual and collective ethics. We see these problems on the vast plan of the human future. We know that it will not be enough that all of humanity live at a new economic level, comparable to that of the average citizens of the U.S.A., in order to be more civilized, more noble, better and even often really happy.

But that fact, of which we are conscious, imposes on us some corresponding duties. It is a frequent affirmation of anarchism that progress is the work of minorities. Another is that the people have no need of an elite. It would be necessary to hear one another.

As for us, we declare our position clearly. There are minorities made up of those whom the caprices of biology and heredity have established for that which guides humanity, opens the advance for it toward the highest destinies. It was always this way; it will always be thus, through the inevitability of biological laws or the caprice of nature, which are found in all species, in all the animal colonies. So we are, willingly, combatants for human progress. We are conscious, and that inserts itself in our idea of ethics, to be a link in the chain of genera-

Editions J.-F. Brocard, Paris, 1840. Chapter V, page 235: Character of community and property.) He was, furthermore, so little convinced of the new sense that it had pleased him to give to the word that, in his second Memoir on property, published the following year, he again used the word “anarchy” in its pejorative sense. And in all his later writings he speaks to us of “commercial anarchy” just like Fourier), of “mercantile anarchy”, of “economic and financial anarchy,” etc. And he also calls himself socialist or revolutionary socialist, and defends socialism or federalist socialism. It was only in exceptional cases, like Bakunin, that he returned to the word anarchy in the sense of society organized and functioning regularly without government.

This historical reminder, which we could amplify, is enough to prove, to whoever does not interpret an idea or a current of ideas only by the etymology of the words of one or two generations and in one or two countries, that we can, in good right, and without betraying what is essential to anarchism—if we mean by this word a doctrine of which Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Mella² and their disciples were the most illustrious representatives—call ourselves libertarian socialists; that there is, essentially, no difference between the thought of these great predecessors and our own. Kropotkin, who made the decisive step for the use of the word anarchy—he explained the reasons for it in *Autour d’une vie*—was not more of an enemy of archies, of the government of the State, than Bakunin. And those who believe they should use on world today that we no longer believe we should employ are not greater [enemies of those things] than we are.

² Ricardo Mella, the most brilliant theorist of Spanish anarchism, defended a collectivism at base more Proudhonian than Bakuninian, but especially, in the economic order, the freedom of application of the various systems of anarchist socialism.

Why, then, we will be asked, and we are asked, do you renounce the word anarchy and its derivations? We respond first in general: because we have a collection of reasons, we have made a number of observations, which lead us to this practice; and because IT IS OUR ENDURING RIGHT to call ourselves as we please if we feel it necessary and useful; as it would be our right to call ourselves by other names (guild socialists, anti-state socialists, anti-authoritarian socialists, etc.).

As for the details, we will clarify that in our opinion, particularly in France³, anarchism has become a group of ideas, conceptions, formulas and principles so different, so contradictory and so incoherent that public opinion cannot identify with it and there are nearly as many conceptions of anarchism as anarchists. A single point of contact unites that disparate group: the negation of authority.

One does not create a social movement having some chance of exerting a positive influence positive on the evolution of society with a single negation. At base, Bakunin, who, despite whatever has been said and is still said by some many slanderers and irresponsible persons, was the most balanced of our thinkers, defined things very well, when he called himself anarchist for the work of destruction, and socialist for the work of construction that must follow. But he never came to the idea of only recommending destruction. He wrote, on the contrary, that it was only to the degree that we were capable of reconstructing that we would have the right, and the possibility, of destroying.

Union around a negation is not enough. A negation is not a social theory, a social doctrine, a human aim, a program, an idea. To say “anarchy”, non-archy, non-government, non-State

³ While he had posed the problem in his book *Precisiones sobre el anarquismo* published at the beginning of 1937, by the Editions de Tierra y Libertad, of Barcelona, the author called himself anarchist, or libertarian communist in the activity that he exerted in the heart of the libertarian socialist movement.

for all the moral inanities in the name of irresponsibility. We have created collectivities of irresponsible sorts with all the moral latitude necessary to observe all the forms of immoral, or amoral, conduct.

A collectivity where the individuals made irresponsibility a theoretical taboo could not go far. As for us, leaving aside all that dialectical rigor could extract from determinism, we note that in human history there are men and minorities who are considered responsible for what they do or let be done, who have accomplished great things and influenced, either for good or for evil, the destiny of men.

Materialism in no way excludes the psychological, and even psychic, faculties. Conscience, will, intelligence, sensibility, the sense of duty, the feeling of responsibility and dignity cannot always be fully explained, given the present degree of the acquisitions of the physical and psychological sciences, which biology shows us are inseparable in so many cases. They are nonetheless a reality more or less great, according to the case, which depends on our choice.

So there is a conception of ethics to develop. In theory, but still more in practice. Let them poke fun; it matters little to us. Irony is too often the mask of powerlessness or immorality. For us, we want ethics to pervade our individual and collective conduct.

We should be a school from the ethical point of view, as from the sociological and economic point of view. The influence of libertarian socialism should be at once intellectual and moral. I recall the great moral influence of the Tolstoyans in Russia. The clarity, the luminosity of our applied ethics, in immediate consonance with our thought, without subterfuges that would attribute contradictions of fact to the influence of the present society—if not, how to overcome it?—must, if our movement can extend itself, be an example and a beacon.

That leads me to write a few paragraphs on a connected subject. We seek the truth, independent of every idea, established

hand, not only to know it, but to know the economy in itself, such as it is, such as it should be, such as it can be, in order to be certain of the fairness of our critiques. To eternally denounce the exploitation of man by man, the low wages, the profit of the capitalist societies is insufficient. That is the infancy of the art with which superficial minds can satisfy themselves. But that does not lead very far, will not lead any farther than we have gone before now. We must penetrate into the guts of the economy. When we know it in order to denounce its poor organization, we will also know it in order to propose and promote a better organization.

We would have the moral right to critique and to propose changes.

That implies a constant activity, a systematic work, a team if possible.

We should appear with an economic doctrine proper to the school of libertarian socialism, which takes up the work of its elders, of its distant founders, and develops it intelligently, with the drive of those who want to convince, and vanquish.

The other development, essential condition of our existence and our justification, relates to ethics. The handling, classification, comparison and accumulation of statistics is of no use if our conduct is immoral.

In that case, it will not serve to liberate men.

Brief or long, the experience of the members of our group has led them to one identical, formal conclusion: without honesty, without steadfastness, without loyalty, without respect for ourselves and others, without personal dignity, without individual and collective responsibility there is no non-authoritarian society possible. Everything collapses and is only decay.

For a long time, we have made determinism the excuse for individual irresponsibility. We have not glimpsed that this led directly to apologizing for responsibility. Now, men are responsible or irresponsible. And we have created the justification

is not to say: “the organization of society in such and such a manner” if we see in society, especially in modern society, an immense and complex ensemble of activities of all sorts that must be harmonized, coordinated under pain of being interrupted, that are subordinated to one another, and that demand something other than declarations de principes that embrace everything, but resolve nothing.

Between individualist anarchism and communist anarchism, the disparity is such that the two schools are always, inevitably and necessarily, in conflict. Between the constructivist syndicalist anarchism and the purely critical anarchism, nihilist or tending to nihilism, there is no valid comparison.

These divisions are themselves accompanied by numerous subdivisions.

The individualism of Han Ryner is not that of E. Armand. The communist anarchism of Malatesta is not that of Galleani. The neo-Malthusian specialization of certain anarchists claims to resolve everything by the limitation of births; the vegetarians specialization, a branch of integral naturism, through a non-meat diet, with or without, according to the cases and schools, dairy products or fish equally. The specialization of free sexuality, transformed into free lust, is also sufficient unto itself.

All these sub-schools, to which we could add others, are part of anarchism, for each denies the archies, and it is enough to deny the archies in order to be anarchist. And not only are they different, they are often opposed. So much that those who get close to the anarchist movement find themselves facing so many current, tendencies, if not battling sects that they understand nothing and could understand nothing about it.

There as well, the multitude of additions, of diversifications has not enriched the essential doctrine. It has impoverished it terribly.

Such is, at least, our opinion. And one has ended up grasping at shadows. With Proudhon, Bakunin, the whole

admirable constellation of the First International, Kropotkin and his friends of the early days, anarchism—at least what we call anarchism—or rather anti-authoritarian socialism there were some essential principles that defined and delimited the doctrine. These principles have also been swamped and submerged, and we have ended up forgetting its great bases and great aims. We want to return to them and not lose ourselves in the labyrinths and foliage of incessant flowerings.

We return to Proudhon—the anti-authoritarian socialist Proudhon,—to Bakunin, to Kropotkin. We prefer the clarity of the essential ideas, having an eternal value, to the confusion of all the little ideas whose value is often debatable.

Critique of the State, more and more deep, wide, methodical, even powerful. Critique of capitalism, of its disorder, of its crimes. Search for new practical sociological bases, new applicable economic conceptions, a new ethics that must be spread in the consciousness and in the life of men. That is what is essential. The rest, as important as it may be (a microbe is gigantic, seen through an electronic microscope), is incidental. Now, the anarchist thought and movement are too lost in the incidental and the essential has been forgotten to such a point that, for example, the critique of the State, and of capitalism, formulated by our great predecessors, of whom Cornelissen, is unknown by the immense majority of those who consider themselves to be anarchists, who do not go beyond summary interpretations, and too often engage in Marxism without knowing it.

So we want to return to the sources. And we would prefer a simpler name, implying some obviously more limited ideas, but with more clearly defined outlines, which allows us to work in depth on the fundamental problems of our era, to provide some views interesting those who do not chase after shadows, and to give an new development to anti-authoritarian socialism—

We find them in Bakunin, and we find them in Kropotkin, the first chapters of whose *La Conquête du pain* seem to have inspired more than on page of Jacques Duboin. We find them in Cornelissen, whose *Traité de la science économique* would deserve more than the general ignorance where it is kept in the movement that he strove to enrich.

Well! All of that is to be taken up again, to review, and also to develop.

But there are two other necessary developments that are for us the indispensable condition of the school that we want to create. The first concerns the constructive work, in the economic sense of the word.

Here again we do not innovate. I have already written, and I repeat, and I can prove, that of all the socialist schools anarchism, at its origins, is, like syndicalism and cooperativism, a school of socialism; it is anarchism that has given the greatest book-based production concerning the future. I can cite, without effort, around fifteen authors, with their books, essays, programs. Bakunin alone writing at least a half-dozen of them—various plans and anticipations.

If these writings have had the incontestable merit of directing the thought of the readers on this sort of problems, or of posing the fundamental principles that it was indispensable to set down, the majority—such as the two books of Pierre Besnard—have the defect either of having lost their currency or of being abstract constructions, imaginative scaffolding without relation to the structure of societies, the reality of human and social economy, the complexity of human relations. To treat the organization of agriculture without knowing anything about agriculture in itself is to construct on the void.

So the analysis of the economy must have two aspects, two aims superimposed on and following one another. On the one hand, the sharp critique of the capitalist economy, which it is necessary to know in order to proceed to its vivisection. In order to show its cracks and errors, it is necessary, on the other

era; Bakunin made it in his critique of the Marxist conception, interpretation and utilization of the State; Kropotkin also in his fine pamphlet *L'Etat, son rôle historique*. But the over work, the work of doctrine remains to be written.

Same problem for the economic critique. It is sad to note that nearly all, if not all the anarchists, are unaware that before Marx, Proudhon had defined and named surplus-value, that his economic critique, seemingly less learned, goes farther than that of Marx, for he does not condemn capitalism in the name of the dialectical law that forces it, so to speak, to die while engendering the new forms that will replace it and establish socialism, he condemns it in the name of justice and not in the Marxist form. For the historians, sociologists and economists, who do not let themselves be imposed upon by the scholastic self-importance of the author of *Capital*, capitalism already exists in the Roman era, in the civilizations of Asia Minor, and even in certain periods of ancient Egypt; Proudhon condemns it as a form of the exploitation of man by man.

Beyond capitalism, it is that exploitation that he attacks. When he said “property is theft,” he meant by that all individual appropriation of the means of existence necessary to other men; when he denounces the proprietor, he denounces the exploiter, small or large, businessman or trader. He denounces him, not because the dialectics of facts or history (which one can very simply call evolution) condemn him to disappear (and if he is condemned to disappear, what use is it to denounce him?) but because he places above all a moral principle: that of justice. Which does not prevent him from accumulating facts.

I have said that he first defined surplus-value. He has also, before Marx, shown how English capitalism had, in the Workhouse, tortured the proletariat.

In his famous polemic with Bastiat, he made a sharp analysis of the methods of growth of finance capitalism. We find in his work many other ideas, many other sketches, many other suggestions—always in what concerns economic critique.

for that which does not aim to resolve the social problem in liberty does not interest us! We will perhaps be told that we regress. We would respond that that which is eternal is always young, and that the fundamental principles constructed by our great predecessors are eternal. The demand for more liberty and justice goes back thousands of years. It is not, however, a contemptible, old-fashioned thing. Fascism is brand new in history. It is not superior for that. So novelty is not a proof of superiority. In human thought, in the philosophical and sociological schools, in the artistic schools as well, moreover, there are advances retreats, progress and decadences. The sign of these decadences is often the invasion of novelties that disfigure more than they fertilize, that destroy everything and construct nothing.

So we return to the sources, but we are not plagiarists, copyists or simple commentators. Shunning the superiority complex that brings scorn to the thinkers and sociologists who founded the school to which we belong, we take from these men, whose creative genius is for us indisputable and often magnificent, the ideas, the social view and their historical, philosophical and scientific justification. We learn from them all that can and should be learned. Then, armed with what we have taken from them, reed with our culture, which we extend more and more, armed with our experience, which makes up part of our culture, studying man and the evolution of humanity, the structure, the needs and the evolution of human societies, the development of the sciences—which despite their variations, especially in biology, in no way contradicts the idea of a society of free harmony—studying the economic and psychological, ethnic, demographic and other problems, we strive—or we will strive—to bring the essential ideas to light, to strengthen their bases, to enlarge them, to render their style more contemporary and their expression more suited to the problems, to the concerns, to the spirit of our era. And when it is necessary, we will not hesitate to highlight the errors of our

great predecessors, and to rectify them. And we have begun to do it, once again, we are not simple copyists.

Peter Kropotkin has written a book that constitutes a fundamental sociological, historical, scientific, philosophical basis for anarchism (we say, ourselves, of anti-authoritarian or non-authoritarian socialism): *Mutual Aid*. We can reproach him—he recognized it in the preface—for an excessive generalization of mutual support—mutual aid, in the original text—in the life of animal and human species. The fact remains that this factor is the principal agent of progress and happiness for the species practicing it. Above all, and in this one can reproach Kropotkin for not having emphasized it enough, we have there a biological basis for the anarchist, non-anarchist conception, of society and its organization.

Well! This book opens an immense horizon for those who want to tackle that task, that dozens of kropotkinians—who must not be confused with the kropotkinists—would have to undertake. Bakunin had already shown us, in his *Philosophical Considerations*, a cosmic view of his anti-authoritarian philosophy, by making non-authority follow from non-divinity, and free association from the materialism where everything is combination, but not subordination.

Kropotkin limited himself to the biological domain, then to the historico-human or sociological. If we take up against at least the scientific studies of Kropotkin? If we even expand them? If we create a libertarian conception of history, showing how the ensemble of the useful activities of humanity, which have permitted its development and evolution, have not been the work of the governors, of the political formations, of the State, but of humanity itself, and of those who, while making up a part of it, are always advanced in the heart of the collectivities and have shown them the road? There is an immense work there to accomplish.

That work will revive, reinvigorate, and expand the thought that is common to us, and could attract many people that the

minuscule side issues, built up into major problems and solutions, repel more than they attract.

The idea of this work would not be original. We find in Proudhon some phrases that summarize it, and Elisée Reclus, who was one of the great humanists of the 19th century, developed it without intending to do so in *L'Homme et la Terre*. But its methodical, systematic realization, in order to make of it a body of scientifically established doctrine would have an enormous importance.

Let us take another necessary development of what our great predecessors have written: the critique of marxism. Tcherkessof had, in *Pages d'histoire socialiste*, shown that the famous concentration of capital, the proletarianization of the bourgeoisie and the pauperization of the proletariat, keystones of so-called scientific socialism, were not confirmed by the English statistics that Karl Marx had used. Since then, the economic and social evolution of the capitalist nations has proven that the forecasts of Karl Marx did not come to pass, that there is not pauperization, but embourgeoisement of the proletariat or of certain proletarian strata, that if certain strata of the bourgeoisie declined, new bourgeoisie strata formed, that a certain form of capitalist concentration was not avoided, being given the multiplication of needs and of the whole of production, of new forms of capitalism; and especially that, under some new forms, including that of the State fonctionnariat, the privileged tended rather to increase while the proletariat was not pauperized.

There is in this an important and necessary critique of marxism, which we should pursue implacably, and more implacably still the interpretation called materialist, but in reality judeo-economist, of history. And as implacably the critique of the Marxist conception of the State, not only in the light of the present Russian situation [fait], but in the light of all of history. Proudhon had made that critique before the letter, in his polemics against the authoritarian communists of his