

May 1

Gustav Landauer

may 1, 1909

After the nordic peoples were violently forced under the yoke of Christendom, they had to celebrate their sacred natural festivals in secrecy. Groups of heathens were forced to sneak to mountain tops under the cover of darkness in order to observe the festival of spring on May 1: the festival of nature's resurrection from the ice.

In earlier times, they had celebrated the day jubilantly and openly. Under their Christian masters, all those who gathered for godless natural rites and devotions to joy were gruesomely tortured and murdered. Some heathens succeeded in turning the Christian fear and horror of demonic natural forces against their masters. They made terrible noise once they reached the mountains and made Christians believe that a wild army of witches, devils, and evil ghosts had gathered there. This made them flee instantly, and the pious children of nature were able to greet the arrival of spring with crackling mountain fires. This marked the first Walpurgis Night and led to the belief among Christians that on the eve of May 1, the witches, devils, and evil ghosts rode to the Brocken¹ and to other wild, lonely peaks.

In one of his most beautiful poems, Goethe portrays, with gracious and profound rationalism, how May 1 once was, in old and happy heathen days, a festival of spring, and how it then disappeared under Christendom and was replaced by the night of the Witches' Sabbath.

What we have been witnessing for about the last twenty years as a new form of May Day celebration has nothing heathen, nothing happy, and hardly anything natural about it. It is a colorless, artificial, and institutionalized event that gives no one joy. Nonetheless, people cling to it fanatically. On occasion, they try to connect it to the old festive day in order to give it the air of tradition. This does not really work, however.

The decision of the Paris International Socialist Congress of 1889 to demonstrate every year on the same day for the demands of the workers – in particular for the eight-hour workday – is characteristic of a movement that lacks initiative, spontaneity, and vibrancy. It indicates a movement that has replaced these virtues with discipline and structure.

No effective demonstration has ever been arranged ahead of time – especially not by some delegates at a congress. Effective demonstrations need a trigger, a spark, a particular concern that connects with hope. It must be assumed that it was not the purpose of the congress' tactical

¹ Highest mountain peak in Northern Germany; traditionally described as the center of Walpurgis Night activities.

decision to prevent such demonstrations. However, it was certainly the result. The “intensity” and “energy” we witness at May Day demonstrations today are nothing but theatre.

Even more pointless and dangerous was the idea of combining the annually pre-assigned demonstration with an annually pre-assigned general strike. What distinguishes revolution – and this is the only true sense a general strike can have – from war is that war is a state institution. As such, it can be prepared, trained, and, to a certain degree, anticipated by wargames. Revolution, on the other hand, is a sudden interruption of ordinary life; a time of disorder that no one can prepare for and that no one can arrange (in particular not annually). Those who demand orderly disorder once a year for the duration of one day are either deceived or deceivers. Wargames are for armies. For the proletariat, there is only the gamble of revolution.

Those who organize today’s May Day celebrations are deceiving everybody and are supported by the deceived. Those who are the loudest in demanding a stoppage of labor are also those who ask their masters and employers to grant them a holiday. Every year, communities of workers have to come up with new ways to compensate for the fines of those who have been taken to court. It is fascinating how stubbornly sacrifices are made for an event that has no other purpose (and cannot have any other) than to try to demonstrate power that does not exist. Every year means are employed that have tragic consequences for many individuals; yet its overall effect on society is little more than comical. And still this is knowingly repeated year after year. It is a sad comedy.

What is characteristic of non-productive movements is that they first decide on something that is wrong and worthless, and then, when inevitably nothing comes of what they have decided on, they search for scapegoats. Parliamentarians of the opposition criticize everything as long as their vote does not count. Yet they are more than eager to compromise as soon as their vote might allow them to partake in power. The same is true for many of those who cling orthodoxly to May 1 as a once-and-for-all implemented holiday, because they cannot even create their own meaningless rituals.

True socialists have nothing to do with such pretense and disguise of weakness. We have no maneuvers and no spring parades; we do not regulate our actions according to the calendar. “Passion is no herring which one pickles.”²

May 1 as an institution is typical and fitting for the revolutionary party. Once upon a time, there was an old chicken that had lost its strength. It had become dry and infertile and could no longer lay eggs. However, it still ran around and cackled incessantly: “Egg, egg! Egg, egg!” This earned the chicken much esteem, making it known as the big egg chicken among those who did not really care about the brave chickens that really laid eggs. The same is true for those – whatever they may call themselves – who concentrate on verbal revolutionism only because they lack the creativity and force for real action. As long as the revolution was alive in Western Europe, i.e., as long as people had clear goals and took clear action, there were no revolutionary parties. These only appeared once the revolution was over and the era of pretense began. These parties maintained that the revolution was still alive and would re-emerge in full force any day. They did so to secure power. Revolutionary parties are dependent on stable governments. Their

² Begeisterung ist keine Heringsware, die man einpökelt auf viele Jahre” is a line from the Goethe poem “Frisches Ei, gutes Ei” [Fresh Egg, Good Egg] (1815). (Landauer writes “...lange Jahre.”)

goals are vague and abstract. None of their members knows how to attain them; and no one dares to either.

Some say that the party needs to achieve democratic power before there can be socialism. Others say that there needs to be a revolution before there can be socialism. In fact, there is very little difference between the two perspectives. The adherents of the first demand democratic government. They will, however, be very happy with undemocratic government if it is their own. The adherents of the second view demand – knowingly or unknowingly – undemocratic government. However, since their politics are bereft of positive ideas, as well as of creativity and force, but are instead characterized by bloody dilettantism, their government will inevitably give way again to democratic government.

Look at Turkey. Have the Young Turks called themselves a “revolutionary party” for the last half century? Have they preached decade after decade that we cannot attain anything without seizing political power? No. They had real goals, and they organized accordingly. They did not desire revolution. They desired a constitution and autonomy. They finally reached these goals in a revolutionary manner because they were determined to reach them and worked hard for it.

Were there a truly revolutionary party in Germany, it would be a republican party. It would not be ineffective from the outset. Neither would it be so ridiculous as to announce everywhere – in meetings and declarations – that it wants revolution. Instead it would begin where every effective movement begins: in assessing the realities and possibilities provided by the current constitution. It would not jump ahead and prattle arrogantly about the final stages of social development, but it would announce its goal, a republic, and then pursue it with quiet determination.

The French got a constitution in 1791 because they desired it. They got a republic in 1792 because they were tired of their unfaithful and treacherous king. They abolished the tithe because they no longer wanted to pay it. During all those years, no one ever said, whispered or shouted: We want revolution! or We want revolutionary power so we can transform society! Had they done this, they would have gotten no constitution, no republic, no revolution, and no freedom. Not for the peasantry, nor the townspeople, nor the bourgeoisie. All they would have gotten were their heads kicked in.

I am speaking in parables here. I am trying to teach. What is crucial is not to propagate temporary measures, but to prepare the realities that one desires. The socialism we want is not socialism of political institutions but of communal organization. We know as well as our enemies (or even more so) what must disappear if we want to attain our goal. However, we also know that it will not simply disappear as a result of agitated condemnation. This is the belief of the downhearted. It signifies lack of creation wrapped in the pompous cloak of radicalism. What really counts is to actively build something new.

If you want socialism, i.e., if you want to live in beauty and happiness and in communities of justice and solidarity, then create it! Look for the cracks in capitalism and find ways to escape the economic war. Figure out how to no longer produce for capitalism’s commodity market, but to satisfy your own needs. This is a collective process: the more that individuals are able to unite their needs, their creativity, and their lives, the more effective they will be.

We are still few, and we are seen by others as a strange and foolish lot. However, we know what our task and our goal are, and we have found our way. This means that we can afford the worst heresy of all, the one that no one forgives: we want to be happy! This May Day shall see for the first time something that will shock the bureaucrats of revolution: happy socialists!

The objective conditions of our lives are no better than those of fellow proletarians or of others who are oppressed. However, we have put up with the desperation and ineffectiveness of complaint and condemnation long enough. The time has come to replace this with hope, confidence, and creative desire.

All misery comes from social conditions. We know what these conditions are today. As long as people accept the role that the demise of the spirit allots them, they will live and suffer under these conditions. As soon as they are filled by the spirit of community and creation, they will be whole humans again and masters of their own destiny.

The first year of our Bund is coming to its end. We have found ourselves and our creative force. We feel like we have come to life again. We feel desire running through our veins. We move from the fumes of the cities to the land. We feel one with nature whose children we are. We wander around and see things in ways in which we have never seen them before. We understand that this is our land. The peasants we meet have stern and distant looks. We greet them with a new love because we have come to them as helpers. We will work the land with them. They need us as much as we need them. The delicious gift we have to offer is a spirit that will bring them happiness after centuries of emptiness and boredom.

Humanity today is sunken, but it shall rise again once it has found its vital energies and creative forces. A time will follow in which humans, devoted both to themselves and to their surroundings, will once again climb mountains together to celebrate the renewal of life with fire and light. Inside of us, this time has already arrived. All we need to do now is to keep it alive and spread it. Let us thus celebrate the coming May Day as a festival of spring, in other words: a festival of renewal!

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Gustav Landauer
May 1
may 1, 1909

Revolution And Other Writings A Political Reader,
<https://libcom.org/article/revolution-and-other-writings-gustav-landauer>

theanarchistlibrary.org