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A discussion on Anarchist Organisation

Isabel Meredith

1903

“I hope yet to be able to claim you for a comrade,” he said: “you are intelligent and open-minded, and cannot fail to see the futility of attempting to tinker up our worn-out society. You must see that our Socialist friends have only seized on half-truths, and they stop short where true reform should begin.”

“I can quite see your point of view,” I replied; “in fact I am more than half a convert already. But I should like to know what I can do. I have been interested now in these problems for a year or two, and must confess that the electioneering and drawing-room politics of Fabians and Social Democrats are not much to my taste; in fact I may say that I am sick of them. A few men like our friend Nekrovitch, who ennoble any opinions they may hold, are of course exceptions, but I cannot blind myself to the fact that ambition, wire-pulling, and faddism play a prominent part in the general proceedings. On the other hand you seem to me to sin in the opposite direction. No organisation, no definite programme, no specific object!—what practical good could any one like myself do in such a party?”

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The doctor smiled a quiet smile of triumph as he proceeded to overthrow my objections: “Why, the very strength of our party lies in the fact that it has not what you are pleased to call an organisation. Organisations are only a means for intriguers and rogues to climb to power on the shoulders of their fellow-men; and at best only serve to trammel initiative and enterprise. With us every individual enjoys complete liberty of action. This of course does not mean to say that several individuals may not unite to attain some common object, as is shown by our groups which are scattered all over the globe. But each group is autonomous, and within the group each individual is his own law. Such an arrangement, besides being right in principle, offers great practical advantages in our war against society, and renders it impossible for governments to stamp us out. Again, as to our lack of programme, if a clear grasp of principle and of the ultimate aim to be attained is meant, it is wrong to say we have no programme, but, if you mean a set of rules and formulas, why, what are they after all but a means of sterilising ideas? Men and their surroundings are unceasingly undergoing modification and change, and one of the chief defects of all governments and parties hitherto has been that men have had to adapt themselves to their programmes, instead of their programmes to themselves. We make no statement as to specific object: each comrade has his own, and goes for it without considering it necessary to proclaim the fact to the whole world. Now you ask me how you could help this movement or what you could do, and I have no hesitation in saying, much. Every revolution requires revolutionists, we need propagandists, we need workers, we need brains and money, and you have both.”

“So you think that one ought to place one’s property at the service of the Cause, and that thus one is doing more good than by helping in the ordinary way?”

“Why, of course, the revolutionist aims at eradicating the causes of poverty and vice, whereas benevolence, by making

it just possible for people to put up with their circumstances, only strengthens the chains which hold mankind in slavery.”

We had unconsciously raised our voices in the heat of discussion, and Kosinski, who had caught our last observations, broke in unexpectedly. It was the first time he had opened his mouth to any purpose, and he went straight to the point: “It is you bourgeois Socialists, with your talk of helping us, and your anxiety about using your property ‘to the best advantage,’ who are the ruin of every movement,” he said, addressing me in an uncompromising spirit. “What is wanted to accomplish any great change is enthusiasm, whole-hearted labour, and where that is, no thought is taken as to whether everything is being used to the best advantage. If you are prepared to enter the movement in this spirit, without any backward notion that you are conferring a favour upon any one—for indeed the contrary is the case—well and good: your work will be willingly accepted for what it is worth, and your money, if you have any, will be made good use of; but if not, you had better side with your own class and enjoy your privileges so long as the workers put up with you.”

These outspoken remarks were followed by a momentary silence. Mrs. Trevillian looked dismayed; Miss Cooper evidently concluded that Kosinski must have dined on steak; Dr. Armitage agreed, but seemed to consider that more amenity of language might be compatible with the situation. Nekrovitch laughed heartily, enjoying this psychological sidelight, and I, who ought to have felt crushed, was perhaps the only one who thoroughly endorsed the sentiment expressed, finding therein the solution of many moral difficulties which had beset me. Kosinski was right. I felt one must go the whole length or altogether refrain from dabbling in such matters. And as to property I again knew that he was right; it was what I had all along instinctively felt. Private property was, after all, but the outcome of theft, and there can be no virtue in restoring what we have come by unrighteously.

Small things are often the turning-point in a career; and, looking back, I clearly see that that evening's discussion played no small part in determining my future conduct. I was already disposed towards Anarchist doctrines, and my disposition was more inclined towards action of any order than towards mere speculation. I was the first to speak. "Kosinski is quite right; I am the first to recognise it. Only I think it a little unfair to assume me to be a mere bourgeois, attempting to play the part of lady patroness to the revolution. I am sure none who know me can accuse me of such an attitude."

Kosinski grumbled out a reply: "Well, of course I may be mistaken; but I have seen so many movements ruined by women that I am rather distrustful; they are so rarely prepared to forgo what they consider the privileges of the sex—which is but another phrase for bossing every one and everything and expecting much in return for nothing; but of course there may be exceptions. Perhaps you are one."

Nekrovitch laughed aloud: "Bravo, bravo, you are always true to yourself, Kosinski. I have always known you as a confirmed misogynist, and I see you still resist all temptations to reform. You carry boorishness to the verge of heroism."