

Anarchism and its Practicability

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December 1924 and January 1925

“Your ideas are all right in theory, but they are not practicable; men need some tangible power to govern them and force them to respect the social contract.” Such is the objection urged against us as a last resort by advocates of the present social order, when after thorough discussion we have answered their arguments and demonstrated that the worker can hope for no sensible improvement of his lot while the machinery of the present social system is preserved. “Your ideas are all right, but they are not practicable; man is not yet sufficiently developed to live in such an ideal state. In order to put them into practice human beings must first have become perfect,” is added by many other persons, undoubtedly sincere, but who misled by education and habit, see only the difficulties and are not yet sufficiently convinced of the principles of work for their realization. And in addition to these avowed adversaries and these indifferentists who may become friends, there rises up a third category of persons to be animated with enthusiasm for our ideals; they loudly assert that nothing can be greater, that the present organization is worthless and must vanish before the new idea, that it is the goal towards which humanity is tending, etc. “But,” they add, “it is not immediately practicable; humanity must be prepared for it, brought to understand this happy condition;” and under this pretext of being practical they seek to revive those reform projects which we have just shown to be illusory. They perpetuate existing prejudices by flattering those to whom they speak, and seek personally to profit as much as possible from the present situation; before long their ideal vanishes to make room for the instinct towards the preservation of the existing order of things. Unfortunately it is but too true that those ideas which are the end and aim of our aspirations are not immediately realizable. The number of persons who have understood them is yet too small a minority to exercise any immediate influence events for the course of our social organization. But is that any reason why we should not work for their realization? If one is convinced of the justice of his principles why not try to put them in practice? If everybody were to say, “It is not possible,” and passively accept the yoke of the present society, it is plain that the capitalistic order of things would still have many centuries to run.

If the first thinkers who fought the Church and the monarchy on behalf of natural ideas and independence; who faced the executioner and the scaffold in order to proclaim these, had said “it is not possible,” while dreaming of their ideal, we should, today, still be bound by mystical conceptions and seigniorial rights. It is because there have always been people who were not “practical,” but singularly convinced of a truth and seeking to disseminate it, wherever they could,

with all their might, that man, today, begins to be familiar with his own origin, and to get rid of his superstitions concerning divine and human authority.

In one of the chapters of his really valuable book, "Outlines of a Morality without Authority or Duty," M. Guyau¹ develops this admirable idea: "He who does not act as he thinks, thinks incompletely." Nothing can be truer. When one is thoroughly convinced of an idea, it is impossible for him, feeling it, not to seek to spread it and endeavor to realize it. How often do disputes arise between friends over trivial matters, in which each maintains his own view without any other motive than the conviction that he is in the right of the matter. Let to please one's friend, or even to avoid wounding him, it would cost nothing to let him speak his mind without either approving or disapproving; since the thing he maintains is of no real importance to our convictions, why not let him have his way? And this we often do in a conversation concerning things about which we have no fixed opinion; but directly something about which we have an opinion comes up, presto! we take sides and dispute with our best friend in defense of our own opinion. Now, if people act this way about trifles, how much stronger must be the impulse received when it is a question of opinions which have to do with the future of all humanity, the enfranchisement of our class, our posterity, and ourselves!

Truly we understand that not everyone can bring the same amount of resistance to bear in the struggle, the same degree of energy in combating existing institutions. Temperaments and characters are not all moulded alike. The difficulties are so great, poverty so severe, persecutions so multiplied, that we comprehend how these must be degrees in efforts towards the propaganda of what is admitted to be true and just. But acts are always in proportion to the impulse received and the intensity of one's faith in his beliefs. Very often one may be deterred by considerations of one's family, one's relations, or the necessities of earning one's daily bread; but whatever be the force of these considerations, if one is really a man they will never go so far as to make him swallow all the infamies that spread out before his eyes. There comes a time when one sends considerations to the devil, remembering that he is a man and that he had dreamed of something better than what he has been compelled to submit to. —He who is incapable of making any sacrifice for the principles he claims to profess, does not really believe in them all; he decorates himself with the label merely for show, because at some time it looked well, or because he pretends to justify certain vices, by the help of these principles; beware of taking him into your confidence;— he will deceive you.

As to those who seek to profit by existing institutions; ostensibly for the purpose of aiding the propaganda of new ideas, they are ambitious knaves who flatter the future in order to enjoy the present in peace.

It is quite plain that our ideas are not immediately realizable; we do not hesitate to admit it. But they will become so through the energy exerted by those who will understand them. The greater the intensity of the propaganda the nearer the hour of realization. It is not by yielding to existing institutions that we shall do battle with them, nor yet by hiding our light under a bushel. To fight these institutions, to work for the advancements of new ideas we must have energy; this energy can come from nothing but conviction. Those, then, who already have the conviction must find their men and labor to impart it to them.

¹ Jean-Marie Guyau, 1885, 'Outline of a Morality Without Obligation or Sanction', <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guyau/1885/morality.htm>

Reforms being inapplicable, as we think we have shown, it would hence be conscious deception to recommend them to the workers. Furthermore we know that force of circumstances will infallibly drive the workers to a revolution: crises, enforced idleness, the development of machinery, political complications, all conspire to throw the workers upon the street, and compel them to revolt in order to affirm their right to existence. Now, since the revolution is inevitable and all reforms illusory, nothing remains but to prepare for the struggle; that is what we are doing by moving directly towards our object, leaving to the ambitious the business of carving out positions and sinecures for themselves from the misery they pretend they would assuage.

Just here, however, we anticipate an objection: "If you recognize that your ideas are not yet ready to put in practice," it will be said, "are you not preaching abnegation to the present generation for the sake of future generations in asking them to strive for an idea whose immediate realization you cannot guarantee to them?" In nowise do we preach abnegation; we merely refuse to delude ourselves as to the facts, nor are we willing to encourage enthusiasts in deceiving themselves. We take the facts as they are, analyze and set them forth thus:—A class which owns all and is unwilling to give up anything on the one side; on the other side a class which produces all, possesses nothing, and has no other alternative than a cowardly cringing to its exploiters, slavishly waiting for them to throw it a bone to gnaw, having no longer dignity, pride, or any quality which uplifts human character, or else to revolt and imperatively demand what is refused to all its genuflections. For those who think only of their own personality, those who want to enjoy themselves at any price and no matter how, there is nothing pleasant in the alternative. We should advise all such to yield to the exactions of present society, to try to chip out their own little niche, not to look where they plant their feet, not to be afraid of crushing those who hinder them; such people have nothing in common with us. But to those who think they can be really free only when their liberty ceases to trammel the liberty of the weakest of their fellows; to those who cannot be happy until they know that the pleasures in which they delight have not cost some disinherited one his tears, to them we say that there is no abnegation on the part of any one who recognizes that one must struggle to be free.

We proclaim this material fact, that there can be no enfranchisement of humanity save through the application of our principles; it rests with humanity to decide whether it will free itself completely, at one stroke, or whether there must forever be a privileged minority which will profit by all its progress at the expense of those who are dying of want while producing for the other. Shall we be the ones to see the morning shine? Will it be the present generation, or that which follows it or a still later one? We do not know, we do not care; it will be those who will have enough energy and courage in their breasts to want to be free, who will find the way to obtain freedom.

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December 1924 and January 1925

from The Road to Freedom, Vol. 1, No. 2 (December 1924) and No. 3 (January 1925)

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