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A Dietzgen Biography

Larry Gambone

Dietzgen was born near Cologne in 1828 and in his youth apprenticed as a tanner, which became his lifelong occupation. He participated in the Revolution of 1848 and at that time first read the writings of Karl Marx and became one of his supporters. Marx had a high regard for this man known as “the Tanner”, considering him one of the few people to understand his ideas, even going so far as to mention this in his introduction to *Capital*. Dietzgen was a frequent contributor to Social Democratic newspapers, particularly the *Volkstaat*, but it was not until 1869 that his first book, *The Nature of Human Brain Work*, was published.

Fleeing Germany a year after the failed revolution, the young Dietzgen went to the United States, where he stayed for two years, spending most of his time traveling and observing American life. He returned to Germany and revisited the US in 1859, this time staying for three years. On returning home, he got a position managing a tannery in Russia, for he was excellent at his craft.

Back in Germany again after the Russian sojourn, he ran for parliament under the banner of the Social Democratic Party, but was not elected. In 1878, Dietzgen spent a year in prison for writing a radical pamphlet. In spite of this ordeal, he kept his characteristic

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Extracted from “*The Nature of Human Brain Work: An Introduction to Dialectics*” by Joseph Dietzgen, PM Press 2010

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humility and sense of humor, declaring after release, "I was handcuffed to another rascal." (Note: not a rascal, but another rascal.)

In 1884, Dietzgen moved to the United States for the third and last time, and became editor of the New York *Der Sozialist*, a position he retained until 1886, when he moved to Chicago. That year, the anarchist editors of the Chicagoer *Arbeiterzeitung* and the American-born anarchist, Albert Parsons, were arrested for the Haymarket bombing. In spite of the threats to his safety, and the ideological differences between socialists and anarchists, Dietzgen stepped in and continued publication of the paper despite having frequently been made fun of in the anarchist press for his socialist stance and rather old-fashioned prose style.

The Socialist Labor Party, of which Dietzgen was a member, tried to distance itself as far as possible from the Haymarket Martyrs and anarchism. The party leaders were outraged by the old tanner's support for the anarchists, but he would not be moved, declaring that he, too, was an anarchist. He wrote, "While anarchists may have many mad and brainless individualists in their ranks, the socialists have an abundance of cowards. For this reason I care about the one as much as the other. The majority in both camps are still in need of education and this will bring a reconciliation in time." Friedrich Engels, hearing about Dietzgen's sympathy for anarchism, was furious. Dietzgen survived the post Haymarket anti-radical hysteria, but died of a heart attack two years later. He was buried alongside his new friends, the state-murdered Chicago anarchists.

His writings were well circulated in the early labor movement. Anton Pannekoek thought enough of them to write an introduction to the collection edited by Dietzgen's son, Eugene Dietzgen, *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy*. Henrietta Roland-Holst of the German ultra-left was also a follower of Dietzgen. The IWW, the Socialist Party of Canada, the One Big Union and the Proletarian Party all lauded the Tanner. The Labour Colleges in Great Britain under Fred Casey taught Dietzgen's philosophy. Most Dietzgenists

were supporters of the anti-Statist tendency of the workers' movement, of which the aforementioned groups were examples. Dietzgen's influence in politics was not to last. In part, it died with the demise of the libertarian socialist tendency in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. It was displaced by the mechanical "Dialectical Materialism" (Diamat) of Georgi Plechanov and Karl Kautsky. Stalin's version of Diamat became the state philosophy of the USSR. Now that the USSR is gone and Diamat with it, and new and global libertarian movement is on the rise, it is time to look once more at the writings of the "Proletarian Philosopher."