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## A discussion with an old comrade

Max Nettlau

1936

Analyzing the general situation, I believe to find at the bottom of all conflicts animosity and collisions between human strata of different levels of intellectual and ethical development. The progressive elements at all times had the greatest difficulty to merge above the dead level of thoughtless routine and usually violently and cruelly enforced stabilization or stagnation. They succeeded from time to time and materially mankind moved from the cave dwellings to the modern cities, but such progress was always obstructed by the intellectual and ethical cave dwellers who in enormous masses still lurk among us and are always ready to stifle and strangle progress either by ignorant or callous inertia or, when handled by interested usurpers, by direct forcible assaults of every progressive cause and its upholders.

Undoubtedly their backward state is largely due to their primitive enslavement, with following privation of education and other means of proper individual and social evolution. But, howsoever victims, they are harmful factors as well, just as the victims of an epidemic, innocent sufferers, constitute a

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public danger nonetheless. Moreover, by consenting to keep their masters by their toil, by executing all their orders against the progressive elements, they did whatever could be done throughout history to prolong the primitive usurpation under ever-changing names, perpetuating authority and exploitation, servile feelings and stunted intellects.

Under these conditions, the hope of a serious emancipating “class struggle” between these primitive, spoliated poor and their cruel dominators, has been and is in fact a generous illusion, and the real struggle, as too often is overlooked, always lays between the intellectually and ethically better developed elements and the underdeveloped masses and their, one might say, undevelopable masters.

After the many unknown ages, some dregs of which can be traced in the always cruel fiction of early religious and in other coarse old manners and customs on record, there was a progressive awakening some 5 to 2000 years ago in the wide belt ranging from parts of China, India, Western Asia, Egypt to Greece and gradually the Mediterranean basin, reaching north into Western and Central Europe and influencing perhaps also neighboring Teutonic, Nordic and Sarmation populations to some small degree, difficult to gauge. Then most of this all was destroyed again by wave after wave of predatory barbarian invasions, whilst intellectually the mildew of Christianity smothered the splendid free thought, science, art and civic life (though degraded by slavery) of classical antiquity.

Upon this the undeveloped had their own way for a thousand years, establishing the material totalization of feudalism and serfdom, the anti-intellectual totalism of the Church, proscribing doubt and research, and the anti-ethical totalism of the “mailed fist,” the right of the strongest. The spoils and remnants of antique institutions and lore kept these barren ages alive materially, whilst some progressive elements in the ancient municipalities, in the Arabo-Judaic spheres, in the secret brotherhoods, in Byzance even which they longest kept up against the

Godwin was indeed fully equipped for his task and composed two large volumes of classical aspect, full of poignant argument and conclusive reasoning from first to last. He grew himself with his task, as the inherent evils of every form of government, dim before his mind when he began, became clear as day to him the more he proceeded in this thoroughly sincere work.

barbarians, preserved what they could of what had been considered already the common property of mankind at large.

A recovery, after such disasters, was but slow and moreover liable to proceed by false steps—facts worth of the closest attention in our present troubled times. Thus the Renaissance of the 15<sup>th</sup> century strikingly corresponds to Fascist barbarism. The religious Revival of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the counterpart of Communism of the authoritarian style and the Modern State, organized in that century, is the prototype of Social Democratic panbureaucratic rule. The totalitarian fanaticism of the old and new religions provoked the disastrous general and civil wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the sates flamed up higher than ever for heroes like Servetus, Bruno and Vannini. The Inquisition, the Jesuits, Calvin's theocracy, the Star-chamber flourished right in to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But tolerance, totalism, cruelty, always higher organized State power rule supreme. [3]

And yet, the spell was broken and authority was defied. Rabelais wrote his "fais ce que voudras," Etienne de La Boetie laid his finger on the main evil, the "servitude volontaire," the stolid, passive obedience of the masses to the tyrants, and the monarchomachi proclaimed the right to destroy such tyrants. Burke later exposed the devices to deceive and defraud the masses inherent in every form of government. The natural rights of men dear to the best men of all ages were reaffirmed again, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century efforts to formulate the rights between nations (Grotius) to the French revolutionary declaration of the right of Men and of Citizens, not to mention acts of keen defiance like the rebellion of the Netherlands, the two English revolutions of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the American Declaration of Independence of 1776.

It required all this and the great scientific effort of the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the international relations of the humanists, the early Scientific Societies, the essentially progressive Secret Societies (Freemasons, Illuminati, etc.), the great stimulus to re-

search given by mechanical inventions and the travels of discovery, a decisive stand against the religious obscurantists in several parts, to permit *at last* that in favorite regions thought and research became relatively unfettered, as in Paris, Holland, London, Edinburgh, etc. and *then only*, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century humanitarian voices could be raised, in many places, internationally and for many good causes. All which we have not yet lost again, goes back to these claims and efforts.

It is utterly evident that the militants of the years up to 1789 were working for a complete emancipation, every one in the cause that lay nearest or dearest to him, none as devisers of totalitarian systems—they were just emerging from secular totalism which they wished to destroy from the root. The few social utopias by isolated authors, weigh not in the balance. Voltaire, Diderot, Helvetius, d’Holbach, Rousseau, Brissot, Condorcet and so many others had larger aims than just to invent new equitable political and social constitutions. They were aware of the immense destructive and educative effort that remained to be done—as it remains today—[4] before a serious reconstruction would be possible (and then it would happen under conditions which they did not pretend to be able to foresee, nor claimed to influence.)

Then the years 1788–1792, especially July 14, 1789, at last showed popular elements in commotion, and the old regime in France was shattered. This was a triumph welcomed all over the globe, but it turned out—as in the 15<sup>th</sup> century—the starting point of popular mistakes, deviations, tragedies, tragic misunderstandings, insufficiencies and defeats once more—just as, above a century later, within our memory the Russian Revolution of March 1917. For the real thinkers were dead or were destroyed by the French Revolution itself like Brissot and Condorcet, and the first ranks were swarmed over by newcomers or inveterated fanatics who at first paralyzed each other, then hurried themselves to the guillotine, the more authoritarian triumphing over the less unscrupulous, until Bonaparte put

tion, etc.), the world of women, of art, of thought, of science. For we must never for an instant be misled by the artificial class-imprisoned restrictions of the fictitious Marxist microcosm.

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When with the exception of Condorcet’s famous last work, the French militants of progress had little chance to coordinate their real opinions as affected by the momentous event of the Revolution realizing itself in a thousand ways before their very eyes day after day, there was one of the many English observers and sympathizers keenly and coolly reflecting on the unknown eventual further developments and the possible and desirable outcome of the spiritual and material reconstruction of a new social life in a large country. William Godwin knew and shared all the aspirations of the preceding humanitarian age of revolutionarized awakening Reason and he saw with regret how the roads leading from the beginning action to final social liberation and those which so many newly intervening, fanatical and shortsighted authoritarians forced the new revolution to take, were always wider differing. His great work, the *Enquiry concerning Political Justice...*, published February 1793, terminated therefore under the impression of the 1792, was a last warning, a late warning already and every day since it was issued, confirmed the warning. *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, the brother of Alexander, about the same time, 1792, after visiting Paris, drew up a manuscript, only partly inserted at the time by Friedrich Schiller in a review which he then edited,—the fragment on defining the limits of State intervention into public and social life—a strict repudiation of the encroachments of State Power, which the new admirers of a stone dead past, very little known to them, of Sparta and republican Rome, could not do enough to welcome, abdicating in the hands of new masters, changing but their fetters and drifting away from freedom.

Aside of all this, the Marxists found pleasure in convoking international socialist and labor congresses, mainly since 1889, and found pleasure once more in driving away the anarchists from these congresses, until 1896. Since then they put this ridiculous exclusivism into rules and then they were “endlich allein” and they called their select body the “Second International.” As they could not play exactly the same game in the field of organized labor, the syndicates, they reduced international labor relations to meaningless meetings of secretaries in out of the way places, as Dublin, Budapest, San Francisco (voted in September 1913, but never held.) All this for fear least the French revolutionary syndicalists, etc. might speak up at a general congress in face of the high labor dignitaries *à tout repos*, the safely embourgeoised managing directors of the great social democratic labor organizations, men who like directors of banks disliked to be remembered that there existed a social question at all and unemployed, possibly even unwashed and starving workers who might still deliriously dream of socialism and the social revolution.

To this continental socialism in the sphere outlined here, had come about 1914. No high talk *à la* Bebel and Jaures, noise *à la* Hervé, clever ruse *à la* Victor Adler, brutal triumph *à la* Kautsky, not even the nearest approach to a glimmer of common sense which spasmodically might be discovered in Bernstein,—nothing changes a whit in this description of a state of things which perhaps had or has analogies only in the the Lamaic priesthood in the Tibetan monasteries. There they have, it is true, the “machine for prayers” and I have never been able to find a corresponding apparatus among the Marxist paraphernalia. But enough has been said here of this fatal mental aberration called Marxism.

Aside of these poor dupes of an overreaching usurper, there is the Anglo-American, the Spanish-South American, the former Russian world to discuss here, and there are other world, that of the peasants, the awakened voluntary forces (coopera-

his foot on the neck of all who survived, just as Lenin did in November 1917. Thus everything was played into the hand of a much more powerful State as the *ancien régime* had been, a universal centralization militarily organized by Napoleon, clerically by the returned Bourbons and for the outmost convenience of the bourgeoisie by Louis Philippe—ripe, after a short-lived republic in which from 1871 to 1936 at least, no progressive popular rising took place, whilst reactionary plots and attempts have been an almost constant threat.

Which was the attitude of *socialism* under the influence of July 14, 1789? Before that day, it had but the tiniest literary or quite locally propagandist existence. It is notable that scarcely any socialist voice as such spoke up then. I am not burdening these remarks with bibliographical details on what little might be quoted here as exceptions. The point is that almost all socialist converged into the advanced sections of the republicans, whilst some of the political leaders adopted more or less socialist opinions or, at least, exhibited them occasionally or in their intimacy without acting upon them in their public capacities. Sylvain Maréchal, anarchist, wrote also in the terms of red hot republican patriotism, though some time later he composed the libertarian passage of the *Manifeste des Egaux*: “disappear, revolting barriers, between the governing and the governed,” which were repudiated with indignation by the Babouvists at their trial. Some socialists who could not at all times limit themselves to professions of revolutionary ultra-patriotism, were exterminated by prosecutions, like the *Enragés* and the Hebertists. Others propounded plans or systems in scattered pamphlets and are forgotten. Some few were intelligent observers and turned away from governmentalism, proposing voluntary associations, like L’Ange in Lyons, soon Fourier himself. Robespierre (by Buonarroti’s description) and Saint Just (by his own fragmentary notes) had or seem to have had final socialist aims, whilst by their action they established before all their own and their friends’ personal dictatorship and had no time to unfold

further plans, as a coalition of the moderate elements outlawed and destroyed them. Their example was sacred to Babeuf and Buonarrati who conspired with other disappointed republicans to establish a communist dictatorship, but were betrayed, in part killed, for the greater part heavily sentenced. Of these, before all, Buonarrati continued to conspire, within the then French Empire, then in Brussels and after 1830 in Paris, against Napoleon and for the French and Italian, also the European political revolution, but ultimately with an inmost nucleus professing the Communist Credo (of which only a Latin version is known to me.) By him the many French authoritarian communists of the 1830s, Louis Blanc and Blanqui above all, were instructed and stimulated.

Thus the gradually increasing dictatorial forms from Robespierre to the Emperor Napoleon were the framework in which authoritarian socialism was expected to originate, to be enforced, to be generalized in its revolutionary communist forms.

Later Napoleon's political Empire engendered visions of an economic universal federation, an immense hierarchy of leaders, advisors, instructors, administrators. Saint-Simon, Enfantin and many others described this in brightest colors. Auguste Comte prescribed still more authoritarian tenets. There were plenty of teachers and leaders to hand for a time, but the people did not care to hasten from under the thumb of on government under that of a new set of self-appointed rulers. The same happened to Cabet whose communism was petty and oppressive even in its smallest, almost familial units, whilst his world organization, never begun, was quite of the Napoleonic pattern.

There were fine feelings of revolt, plenty of energy and sacrifice among the revolutionary communist workers in France in the thirties and forties and in June 1848; but their opinions—with the sole exception of the short-lived group of *L'Humanitaire* (1841)—did not rise above expectations or dreams of general enforcement of their will by dictatorship.

anti-social being, perpetual beasts of prey. Bakunin renewed and completed these federalist affirmations from 1867 onward, failing equally. The anti-authoritarian collectivism of the Latin sections of the International and of Bakunin had some hold on the Paris workers, organizing since 1864, as far as they were under the influence of Varlin. The Commune nominally combined quite a number of shades of opinion, with a strong authoritarian majority; if not destroyed by military defeat in May 1871, it might have been torn by great internal dissensions in a still more authoritarian direction, most probably.

After that great disaster of the Parisian massacres of the last week in May 1871, Marx thought the moment come to drag in the nets and annex more or less all the organized socialist movements, but we know how Bakunin and others strongly resisted, with the Latin countries from Belgium to Spain and Italy in their support and from them—the years 1871 to 1873—dates the absolute separation of authoritarian and anti-authoritarian organized workers. Between 1876 and 1880 the movements took strength once more in France; there also, from then until to-day, anarchists and socialists are strangers to each other, bitter opponents. Neither certain new parties, forming since the latter eighties, so-called “independent socialists” to whom social democratic quietism and routine were intolerable—in Germany, Holland, Scandinavia, France (Allemanists), etc.,—nor the large non-political or anti-political syndicalist federations since the nineties, could bridge over the absolute scission. Usually the “independents” became anarchists or returned to the social democratic fold, and the anarchists and socialists cooperating within the syndicates either felt both as syndicalists now, being less and less influenced by their personal socialist conceptions (though never quite un-influenced, the authoritarians of them, at least); or they acted all along as partisans and there was full occasion for this, as most of these federations were much disunited internally.

Neither Fourier's educational appeal, then, nor Proudhon's slashing criticism of the authoritarian misleaders and unfolding of non-governmental socialism could prevail in their time, in France, a century ago. Proudhon wished before all the economic transactions between men freed of governmental influence and interference; he seems not to have appreciated fully how much these merely "economic" man would have been (by education in the Fourierist or anarchist sense) to be really free themselves, State or no State. It was a great pit that Fourierists and Proudhonists did not find means to cooperate intelligently and to complete each the other, mutually. This happened but in a few cases and then real libertarians originated as the brothers Reclus, Coeurderoy, Déjacque and very few others (of course I summarize here broadly the details of such developments) Proudhon's critical voice was greatly listened to, but his economic fascinations hindered a really large gathering of antiauthoritarian socialists in the years 1848–51 when public activities were least fettered.

The authoritarians were topmost in these years and the history of the first French Revolution was repeated. Blanqui grasped for power, but was quickly eliminated (May 15, 1848.) Louise Bonaparte schemed, conspired, betrayed for power and promptly got it, gradually to the fullest extent, until 1870, being most likely already the second inspiration of the disastrous insurrection of June 1848 which crushed the Parisian proletariat until 22 years later his own regime had crumbled to pieces. During the fifties and sixties, conspirative, revolutionary, republican socialism, preparing to rise against the Empire, was spreading and Blanqui came to the front once more. Proudhon made his great effort to oppose *Federation* to the Napoleonic and Mazzinian affirmation of the *national states*—that unfailling means to perpetuate wars, as history from 1859 to 1936... is showing; but he failed, as the authoritarians, imperialists, republicans or socialists, never abandon their totalitarian aspirations which make them into

Some spent their efforts in the secret societies; others, inspired by Louis Blanc, Flocon and others by and by agitated to have the vote, looked forward to State Socialism and in the mean time, to State intervention, State help, legislation, elections and all that—and these were the *démoc-soc*, the first *democrates et socialistes*, the social-democrats.

Fourierism, properly interpreted, was the earliest, keenest and, unfortunately, little heeded appeal to study the conditions of free cooperation and harmonious social convivance by thought and experience, instead of imposing from above by force and even by persuasion cut and dried totalitarian systems. It tended ultimately to that largest possible freedom which others call anarchy, proceeding to build it up on the strongest foundations (social conditions) and with the best prepared materials (men), emancipated from noxious factors to which they no longer give their support (the old system.) Considerant admirably elaborated the idea of the free autonomous communes and their federation. But the Fourierist-informed academy of Social Studies met with no response from the impatient, was hateful to the authoritarian system-mongers and had no attraction for the people. So this great educational and experimental initiative never came into full life, but not a few of its participants—characteristically to a notable extent medical men, scientists, agriculturalists, etc., whilst the Saint-Simonians were largely of the industrialist and commercial sphere, etc.—not a few of the Fourierists then specialized on social reforms of an autonomous, self-ordained, voluntary character and on the European continent continued the directly humanizing work of the great pre-revolutionary humanitarians.

In fact, human revival in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had to a large extent set in by brushing away the atavistic religious fictions and was full aware that the right beginning of all lay in education from infancy to the adult state. Hence the great pedagogues from Rousseau to Pestalozzi, and Fourier felt the necessity of

providing similar chances of full development to adult men as social individuals. Only the right man in the right place could be a partner in a prosperously growing organism. All the other socialists were hypnotized by the soldier of the Revolution or of the Empire who, to all appearance, needed but to be commanded to go to the end of the world or to fetch the moon and the stars down by order. No doubt, Fourier had his weak sides and may have outshone Napoleon in ambition; but he had the great honesty to produce all his teaching as an advice, an offer of help, and never to seek to cram it down the throat of others as almost all the others wished to do. Socialist systems *at all times* are peremptorily influenced by the character, the qualities, the situation and the conscious or unavowed desires of their originators: once formulated, they are either decreed to be intangible [unchangeable?] (*ne varietur*) and then block the way as real “erratic blocks” or changes in the life of the originators result in changes or new tactics, which their adherents have got to endorse. When we rummage all the first models of a technical museum or a Patent Office, it is not very likely that we should find materials to reap a small harvest of grass and to make a cow give milk. Only by careful individual selection useful [bi cets] will be found and some day properly educated people will use some of them as building material, if they still have need of them. This applies to absolutely all, from Saint-Simon and Owen to the triple-faced Marx and to every form of modern “plans.”

I call Marx “triple-faced,” because with his particularly grasping spirit he laid a claim on exactly three tactics and his originality no doubt resides in these pan-grasping gesticulations. He encouraged electoral socialism, the conquest of parliaments, social democracy and, though he often sneered at it, the People’s State and State Socialism. He encouraged revolutionary dictatorship. He encouraged simple confidence and abiding, letting “evolution” do the work, self-reduction, almost self-evaporation of the capitalists until the pyramid

tumbled over by mathematical laws of his own growth, as if triangular bodies automatically turned somersaults. He copied the first tactics from Louis Blanc, the second from Blanqui, whilst the third correspond to his feeling of being somehow the economic dictator of the universe, as Hegel had been its spiritual dictator. His grasping went further. He hated instinctively libertarian thought and tried to destroy the free thinkers wherever he met them, from Feuerbach and Max Stirner to Proudhon, Bakunin and others. But he wished to add the essence of their teaching as spoils to his other borrowed feathers, and so he relegated at the end of days, after all dictatorship, the prospect of a Stateless, an Anarchist world. The Economic Cagliostro hunted thus with all hounds and ran with all hares, and imposed thus—and his followers after him—an incredible confusion on socialism which, almost a century after 1844, has not yet ended. The social-democrats pray by him; the dictatorial socialist swear by him; the evolutionary socialists sit still and listen to hear evolution evolve, as others listen to the growing of the grass; and some very frugal people drink weak tea and are glad, that at the end of days by Marx’s *ipse dixit* Anarchy will at last be permitted to unfold. Marx has been like a blight that creeps in and kills everything it touches to European socialism, an immense power for evil, numbing self-thought, insinuating false confidence, stirring up animosity, hatred, absolute intolerance, beginning with his own arrogant literary squabbles and leading to inter-murdering socialism as in Russia, since 1917, which has so very soon permitted reaction to galvanize the undeveloped strata and to cultivate the “Reinkulturen” of such authoritarianism, the Fascists and their followers. There was, in spite of their personal enmity, some monstrous “inter-breeding” between the two most fatal men of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marx and Mazzini, and their issue are Mussolini and all the others who disgrace this poor 20<sup>th</sup> century.