Max Nettlau
Another Point of View
A Reply to the Editor of Freedom
1910

Retrieved on 11th May 2023 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Published in *Freedom* 24 no. 251 (March, 1910): 21–22.

theanarchistlibrary.org

Another Point of View

A Reply to the Editor of Freedom

Max Nettlau

1910

Dear Comrade,—The contradictory statements which "Anarchist Communist" points out in my January article ("A General Survey," see his letter in Freedom, February) may be due to my want of logic, and I stand open to be corrected; they may be contradictory in appearance only where I failed to make myself quite clear; they may also be reconciled by an explanation which gives the reasons of an unexpected divergence of development. I am looking out for such reasons, and when I shall have stated the case in a clearer way than I may have done, "Anarchist Communist" and others will help me to find these reasons.

I mentioned a number of "progressive" and a number of "reactionary" facts; both lists might be largely increased and intermediate degrees noticed. Where is the contradiction? The facts are there. To me it is an open question whether progress or reaction predominates; both of them have a large field and neither shows signs of definite decay.. Broadly speaking, all that adds to the well-being of mankind is progress, all that reduces this well-being is reaction. The mechanical, industrial progress of mankind is enormous, but nature's riches are being exhausted in a tremendous degree.

Man is being perfected by education, hygiene, etc., in many ways, but physical degeneration nevertheless is on the increase. Socialism seems to spread everywhere; but looked at closer, each party, each leading man bear the germs of corruption and degeneration in themselves. So hard facts everywhere point to a two-fold development of mankind, part of it being able to realise progress and others being incapable of doing so, strive as they may. This makes me look for the reason of it, and I believe it is to be found in the natural diversity of man.

By this I mean that at each given moment, just as mankind consists of children and adults, of strong and weak, of gifted and less gifted, of people of different temperament, etc., it consists of people in whom the desire for freedom and solidarity is developed in a different degree, yet all manage to live side by side. Why should this be different in the case of varying person's appreciations of the quantity of personal and mutual freedom and solidarity? Or, to put it another way, can it be expected that on this particular field relative uniformity will be realised when it does not exist, and never existed, on any other field? Do I mean to say by this: "Whatever is is right," or is reasonable?' Certainly not; only I admit that I cannot help things being as they' are, that I cannot change the balance of power.

I have too high an opinion of Anarchism to believe that it could be realised except by real Anarchists. I neither believe that it can be spread infinitely by a mechanical increase of propaganda, nor that it will automatically spring up under "equal opportunities for human development." I want it and others don't; they want State Socialism or capitalism and I don't; mere force of persuasion would make each of us but unwilling serfs of the other; we are different and we can't help it. Anarchism without Anarchists would be as impossible as State Socialism without people willing to submit to it. No other system is capable of generalisation; why should Anarchism *at the very beginning* be generalized, when everything in Nature reaches full development only at the height of its natu-

are counted by millions, Socialism is on the way to become a State institution, but its spirit is gone.

Anarchism is courting the same danger of evaporating and vanishing by the ambition to extend its sphere over all the ordinary Labour struggle, Syndicalism. The failure of the two other schemes of *wholesale* world reform is palpable; I grieve to see Anarchism, which I love, ready to follow them on the road leading to nominal, purely formal realization, and in reality the extinction of the real spirit of our ideas.

bring about a desire for *freedom and comradeship among men and women whom real affinity brings together*. Anarchism offers all this, and if in these coming days of disillusion its "oases" will be shining forth as bright green spots, the time will have come when these oases will increase, the surrounding ground will be fertilized, and by and by the ultimate aim of fertilising the whole desert of barren modern society will be nearer completion.

I agree with the words of "Anarchist Communist": to "work for Anarchist Communism and take our full share in the economic struggle"; but I believe that this is *not all*, and if what can be done besides is perhaps only dimly visible to my mind and difficult for me to make clear, others may grasp what I mean, express it better and fuller, and by practical work by and by set it going, We want to see something of Anarchism in real life, and can achieve this if we only work for it, just as Art and Science, Freethought and whatever there exists of humane ideas and feelings won their place at the table of life, not by words nor hopes nor the help of others, but by their own deeds. These, *Art*, *Science*, and *Freethought*, are leading examples for me, whilst Christianity and Socialism are warning examples of what ought not to happen to Anarchism.

For Socialism was originally conceived as realizable only by Socialists, outside of the present system, but not necessarily on the ruins of it; Utopian island, phalansteries, etc., might exist side by side with the ordinary system. Blanqui, Marx, and others, however, struck the bold blow of indentifying Socialism with the aspirations of the proletariat, and it merged into political Radicalism and the Labour struggle. They simply imitated the ambitious heads among the early Christians, who transformed the voluntary groups of real believers in a better mode of life into organized Churches, and soon managed to make Christianity the compulsory State religion. We all know that whatever there may have been humanitarian in the aspirations of early Christians, got lost on the way; and with Christianity triumphant everywhere *nominally*, its spirit was all along dead and gone. The same happens to Socialism: Socialists

ral growth? Everything grows out of small beginnings; the very best men are the most modest. Why should Anarchism—that prime essence of freedom, common sense, and fairness—require that all should bow to it before it deigns to enter, into operation? "All progress is initiated by minorities," I am told. Quite right; let us do this with regard to Anarchism. This statement of my opponent, which I accept, does not necessarily imply that these minorities are able to make the majorities *follow* them and equally realise progress, which would mean generalising it. In fact, up till now *most progress remains limited to minorities*. Art and Science, boldly defended by infinite minorities; Freethought the same; what part is the majority taking in these? Hardly any; only after stoning and burning the minorities on these fields, they just manage to let them alone unless egged on, by their leaders to persecute them. Everything, that is above a certain level of perfection (to use that dangerous term "level") seldom exceeds a limited sphere; economic demands even which for Anarchists and earlier Socialists mean complete mutual solidarity, for wider spheres mean only appropriation by limited groups or State property, or appropriation by new collectivities.

All I ask is: Why, by what mysterious process, should all this happen differently in the case of Anarchism? Therefore I said: Anarchism must begin at the beginning, must be modest and proportionate in its initial undertakings; and I used the image of an *oasis*, which seems to illustrate my meaning.

To explain this further, suppose an arid desert and a small, limited supply of grain, manure, fruit trees, tools, etc. To fertilise this desert, is it better to scatter these scanty grains all over the sand, where most of them will dry up, and only here and there by chance a thin covering of green may rise, or is it preferable to unite all the materials to create a few real oases, which means no loss of materials, some real nuclei, and by and by, perhaps, the connecting of the oases by fertilized ground and the reclaiming of nearly the whole desert? I think the latter course is preferable. To the former

I liken the usual broadcast of propaganda, sowing into the wind, with here and there a few grains taking root. The latter would correspond to the efforts or realisation of Anarchism in present life which I have in mind, and which do not in the least mean "the life of a recluse." What I mean, I explained in an article published in *Mother Earth*, December, 1907; it is, in short, resistance to the State by all possible means along the whole line of State interference, and the creation of economic resources by voluntary co-operation outside of capitalism.

If we were strong enough to destroy forthwith the State, and capitalism, we should do so. To become sufficiently strong, we must not always rely upon others, expect others to do this work, *the workers* to destroy the State and capitalism; but we must show what we can do *ourselves*, and then only will others have confidence in our ideas and accept them more largely and be at one with us. Propaganda by *our own* direct action seems to me the best kind of propaganda, the only one containing solid, perceptible arguments; everything else is a matter of personal inclination, reasoning, persuasion, belief, not a real object-lesson.

I do not mean a rush to found Anarchist colonies; that would be almost running away from present society. I mean standing up where we are and making a stand of it as the early Freethinkers, the Quakers, and others did. Let those who must attack and fight do so; I feel flee of all quietist, Tolstoyan leanings; but let others who are not inclined to fight, besides their verbal and literary propaganda, also give some example of Anarchism or *some part of it* in real life. Let them and their friends thus become themselves local "oases" of free and fair-minded people, and this may do more to attract people; to examine Anarchism closer than continuous verbal or written assertions, which, if dealing with public matter, are less and less taken notice of by people of any value; even our anti-Parliamentary talk savours too much of politics to win the confidence of people who, even if they vote for what they believe to be the "lesser evil," have no esteem for any politician.

I do not pretend to give any advice how all this is to be done; I only wish to make clear that between "spreading our ideas" (the usual verbal and written propaganda, I take this to mean) and "the life of a recluse," there is this third way of, acting, these *object-lessons in Anarchism or some part of it*, which may become a more recognized factor in our movement, than, to my experience at least, it is at present.

What about Syndicalism? Help it along as much as possible, but beware of being merged in it. A Trade Union is necessarily one of the most primitive, least perfected forms of association, because it comprises men of every variety of personal character and opinions, brought together only by the identity of profession and local residence; it can properly serve only Trade Union purposes. If they were able to attack capitalism effectively by a general strike, etc., and overpower it, the spoils would belong to them—the materials and tools of each trade to the respective Union, and a new appropriation would follow, labour trusts succeeding capitalist trusts. As to the, State, they would rearrange it under the name of an Administration or Executive, with Labour delegates, etc. Anarchism has not the ghost of a chance under all this.

But instead of all this happening, everything points already in another direction, to the next phase of economic evolution; which is likely to be a compromise between Labourism and Capitalism under the common protection of the State—a new lease for the present system by a readjustment of the claims of Capital and Labour. Anarchists should beware of being crushed by the coming downfall of Syndicalism. They kept clear of politics and witness its present degradation—Socialist and bourgeois politicians compromising everywhere for the price of a share in the spoils. The same will happen to Syndicalism—its larger aims will be bought off at the price of smaller concessions to Labour. Some irreconcilable Socialists and Syndicalists will remain, only to emphasise the tameness of the big majorities. All this will lead to a revulsion of feeling against politics and mere trade associations of strangers with strangers, and