

Authority and Freedom

In Their Ages-Old and World-Wide Struggle

Max Nettlau

August 8, 1929

Many of us who know and feel the beauty of the anarchist ideal, are struck and at times disheartened when they see what a small place anarchism seems to hold in modern life and thought. It is indeed strange to see the disproportion of the numbers of those whom our always strenuous propaganda reaches directly and the many hundreds of million[s] on this globe who are under the sway of immensely developed means of determined, mostly forcible propaganda, by press, pulpit, politics and every other kind of publicity, in the interest of capitalists, militarists, priests, Bolsheviks, social democrats or of simple emptyheadedness, the loads to be filled by organized réclame for the fashion of the hour in hats or neckties or the latest religion or conception of the mysteries of life. From the huge North American world, worshipping business and success, success and business, to the immense Russian world, apparently struck dumb in admiration before the benefits which a benevolent Marxist dictatorship heaps upon it, to the distorted and distracted mentalities of the many European countries of which, a few neutral nooks and corners excepted, not one has recovered a mental equilibrium since 1914 and all abandon themselves to authoritarian regimes, cloaked or cynically unbarred like Mussolini's,—everywhere authority appears paramount. And what [is] more, the socialist and labour parties, swelled into dozens of millions of nominal adherents by now, are part and parcel of these orgies of authority: not only the bolshevist usurpators come from their ranks, but the men at the head of the largest European countries, the Briand, Macdonald and Snowden, Hermann Müller and Hilferding, and the men who represent the deepest abysses of reaction, the Mussolini and the Pilsudski.

Does this, then, means that modern mankind has finally taken sides for authority and the modern proletariat for authoritarian socialism in whatever form, suave or crude, it is crammed down its through, and that there is no hope left for freedom and its most thorough and complete exponent, anarchism?

By no means this is the case, in my full conviction. Only the quickened pace of evolution, leading first to the period of sterile convulsions, in [the] midst of which—who knows at which stage of it?—we linger, before a salutary revolution sweeps away the dross and gives space and light to the many healthy elements disposed to build up a free society, only this convulsionary crisis made so many masks fall of[f], so many scales fall from eyes, and we see things very much clearer than before and this is a good advantage in any case, and can and ought to be made a much greater one, if we examine these new aspects with attention and drawn the right

consequences from it and act upon this new insight. But to explain my meaning and put forward my hypothesis, I must go back into the past and try to get at the roots of certain matters. In the still young intellectual life of applied freedom, that is anarchism, little, if anything, is as yet finally settled and in a real living organism this could not well be otherwise; from apparent stability the road leads to decay and death.

However authority may primarily derive from experience and protection and their imparting for the benefit of the weak, however freedom to the weak, say, to a newborn child, may under some circumstances mean abandonment and ruin, [2] and how salutary the delicate fusion of both may be in some cases like the mother's care for the helpless infant and an intelligent teacher's co-operation with his ignorant pupil, yet it could not be expected that delicacy, adequate equitable solutions should be found and made to prevail in this respect in the innumerable relations between men which their life, rising from primitivity into always more complicated forms constantly made and unmade and formed again.

Hence authority and freedom both natural functions within their spheres, expanded, competed, wrestled, intermixed and entered strange combinations, producing the rough and coarse fabric of early forms of organized society with both authority and freedom in almost every case in the wrong place and seldom, if ever, in the right place. Protection then became domination, education became severity and enforcement, freedom became privilege and tyranny, the social use of things was replaced by their private use, property, and by the ceaseless accumulation of property, monopoly, with the corresponding spoliation of the weaker, the propertyless who became the enslaved. In this first great struggle then, as presumably those who hold authority by means of experience and strength and talent were superior as a fighting element to those who stood up for their freedom, but were yet immature, weak and inexperienced, the authoritarians have won and had their own way from these immemorably prehistorical days to this present day, a long spell of time, which however, if mankind is to reach a really humane stage, worthy of it, such as its best thinkers and prophets always foresaw, is still but an initial stage of its development.

So the prospering and prominent authoritarians of the present glorious epoch have really nothing to be very proud of, except the extreme vestustity and obsolescence of their system. They are still the worthy direct descendents of the caveman, they knock their opponents on the head as those did and they have perfected the instruments of mutual destruction and the implements of keeping their slaves (mostly called fellow citizens or even tovarishes) in submission to a degree which would strike the caveman with awe and win their full support. This, then, is the result of an evolution where freedom was systematically eliminated and authority was interbreeding: only deformities could be the products. Whether the worst stage is reached or what may yet be before us, we cannot foresee.

Turning away from this sore spectacle, let us look at the history of freedom, relegated to the background and ill-treated by brute authority, but never uprooted, never admitting to have been beaten, always bravely struggling forward.

Driven from public life and from the access to the riches of the Earth, henceforth usurped by monopoly, freedom lived in individuals, in private life, in the feelings and sometimes the actions of anonymous collectivities; its sphere were intellect and feelings, thought and conduct. Its products were sociability and science, ethics and human dignity in conduct, sometimes rebellious defiance of authority and hard blows struck at authority. Life which would have been impossible in the hellish whirlpool of authority—just as it is felt to become intolerable in countries under a super-authoritarian pressure, with no free breathing air, as fascist Italy and bolshevist Russia—

owes everything to freedom, every lightening of its crushing burden, authority and monopoly, every mitigation of the primitive [] mentality of the victims of authority, those who wield it and those who submit to it, every progress in knowledge and its application in practical life, everything then, indeed. [3]

As the use of intellect, the essential factor enabling experiment, research and valid progressive results, is dependent of conditions of freedom, and as the thorough applications of such results is equally dependent, in its degree of efficiency, from the most favorable conditions which are those of the least quantity of obstacles, that is, of the greatest quantity of freedom, it is evident that freedom is the most vital factor in the development of humanity and that authority—the nearest plausible solution for very primitive people—must step back and if, as is in its very nature, it resists, it must be overthrown. For authority is by its very origin a conservative, a non-productive, non-creative factor; it can impart acquired experience, but it cannot acquire experience itself. It is merely executive, not thinking. It is only capable to obey orders or to outstep them in a wrong direction, making things worse. It is like the sentinel placed to guard a pile of wood and which will be stationed in that place for a hundred years, if not countermanded by a new order. In exactly this way centenarian and older laws still weigh upon us. The result is that the results of free human intellect, created usually under most difficult conditions, are always applied in a still more imperfect and obstructed way and mankind benefits by them indefinitely less than it might under the free play and exercise of freedom.

So authority is pertinently the most antisocial factor, as freedom is the most social factor, and humanity is bound to understand this and then to act upon it, and in this lays our unquestionable and best founded hope for an evolution towards conditions favorable to the realization of anarchism. Antisocial forces by and by get out of touch with the living world and become unfit to live; just as this happened to the prehistoric overlarge and ill-proportioned fauna, from the ichthyosaurus to the diplodocus, so the unsocial State organisms and the parasitic capitalist [] will die off and live-fit, right proportioned, efficient and associative organisms will take their place.

This great task, to replace uncouth, inefficient, grasping and wasteful authority by the operation of brisk, efficient, sociable and disinterested freedom is the one great problem of human progressive evolution and all men and collectivities of real value have at all times worked for it in the most varied ways and in every domain, whilst all domineering and parasitic elements, all vested interests centring in their conservative egoism, have bitterly opposed it, by all means, among which the mental enslavement of the uneducated toiling disinherited masses has always been the most efficient one. They made these victimized masses worship authority, God and their kings and masters, and fostered that spirit which Etienne de la Boëtie in the sixteenth century already called the spirit of voluntary servitude (*servitude volontaire*), a spirit not only of resignation and fatalism, but of real auto-suggestion of the innate rightfulness of submission and obedience, the spirit which in the English language some generations ago created for the rich and middle classes the unchallenged description as “your betters,” “our betters,” as if two races of man had been “created by God,” the “vile multitude” and the “betters”!

Resistance and rebellion against the all pervading authoritarian system must therefore be all-embracing also, comprehending the intellectual, social, political, moral and every other domain, as everything was and is misshaped and travestied by authoritarian influence, for the keeping up of privilege and monopoly. This absolutely necessitates the universality of the struggle for emancipation which must be total, intellectual, social, political, moral, sexual, ethical, artistic,

etc. All these efforts have their own rhythm, methods, chronological and local conditions of development, but are parts of a large general effort, and this general effort, the rally for the great struggle, is the present and coming struggle for complete emancipation, for a free or, as we call it, an anarchist society. Let it be well understood then, that we value every one of the partial efforts, components of this total effort, but we understand that only the total effort can bring real emancipation, partial efforts cannot. [4]

Thus we value infinitely the freethought effort, but by itself alone it is no remedy: bourgeois and statist freethinkers are as opposed to social and political emancipation as the religious people themselves.

Thus we value equally well the greatest amount of political freedom, but we recognize that the reduction of State-interference to a minimum, Herbert Spencer's ideas literally realized, will not prevent this minimum of a State to protect property and to remain the bitter enemy of socialism and up in arms against it.

Thus, again, we value every bit of work done for socialism, but we see that unfree forms of socialism, from reform-mongering State socialism to dictatorially regulated bolshevist so-called communism, bring no freedom to the people, make everybody—except the directly profiting dictatorial apparatus—not only unhappy, but by the inevitable incompetence of such an artificial imposition, also more destitute and suffering than he [they] ever may have been.

These partial emancipations therefore, welcome by themselves as every liberating effort must be, are just the initial, fragmentary stages of emancipation and are likely to become extinct again, if they remain isolated. Thus the freethought movements, as sympathetic as can be to me, for certain, remain stationary, as the freethinkers, divided upon most other subjects, seldom move forward collectively in other respects on the roads leading to freedom. Again, liberalism, radicalism, even when accepting freethought, may remain completely antisocialist and immobilized in that way. And socialism, blindly accepting Statism and scorning Anarchism, equally has landed in the blind alleys of reformist collaborationism and of dictatorial Communism, enforced by a governing minority with the help of the bureaucracy, the army and the open and secret police.

This demonstrates the non-viability of such partial emancipations, if they disregard or reject or combat solidarity with every other effort for emancipation. This was always understood by real anarchists, and Bakunin's Federalism, Socialism and Antitheologism, later expressed as Atheism, Anarchism and Collectivism, and thus accepted by the antiauthoritarians of the International, is the result of this insight into the inseparability of intellectual, political and social emancipation, to which the other domains, above mentioned, implicitly belong as well. Such a socialism alone is, then, a complete and fit-to-live socialism, whilst what comes short of it, is valuable as a substance, but defectuous as an organism, just as the one arm, the one leg, which a mutilated man may possess, are valuable as such, being better than no arms, no legs at all, but none the less leave this poor man a cripple.

A century ago and ever since the French Revolution which, in the wake of the American Revolution—like the rebellions and revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (German peasants, Netherlands, England, etc.)—had shown the possibilities of mass movement for thorough changes, socialism was conceived as such a mass movement swayed by enthusiasm, intelligent conviction, organization, the effect of experiment, social rebellion, conspiracy or any other powerful factor to [5] become universal, all powerful, victorious and then able to realize one or the other broad, generous forms of socialism. The age of Washington and Mirabeau, Danton and Napoleon believed in such all sweeping possibilities and according to their personal

disposition and inclination, the leading socialist thinkers imagined motive powers as just described as the irresistible impulses towards an onslaught on the capitalist system by rebellion, towards its abandonment after successful socialist experimentation (Fourier, Robert Owen) or they constructed an automatic collapse of capitalism (Marx), they believed in immense forces of rebellion awakening [] the people (Bakunin), in cool reasoning accepting the principles of equitable exchange and fair contracts (Josiah Warren, Proudhon), etc. The workers seemed disposed to organize on a large scale (trade unionism) and were indeed, irrespective of socialism, driven to do this in sheer defense of their physical life threatened by the atrocious factory system, which then, in its initial greedy impetus, devoured men, women and children in the factories, as their furnaces devoured coals. The workers seemed also disposed to exercise collective political and social pressure (Chartism) and it became soon usual to keep them together, where they had the franchise, as labor electors, to organize them into labour parties which sent representatives into the elective bodies, etc.

All this produced an overwhelming variety of socialist criticism, plans, systems, tactics and experiments and also a constant collision, rivalry, mutual refutation and very serious enmity between the schools of socialist thought. At that time science had but just began to elevate itself above a similar state of intolerance and internecine war and perpetual quarreling, and the establishment of criteria for objective measurement of the value of scientific work and the friendly co-operation of scientists were just in the making. On the other hand centuries of religious warfare, in [] vituperation, by the stake or by the most cruel wars, of political fanaticism, of every crude form to enforce authority, lay only just behind the period of more brotherly feelings which gave the impulse to these early socialists. So they were, one and all, as intolerant as preachers of [] sects, as seventeenth century philologists on the warpath, as the statesmen of the French Revolution themselves who sent their opponents under the knife of the guillotine, and this intolerance was to them a sacred duty; laxity, as they would have termed tolerance, was treason in their judgment. Under these conditions, which the early socialist literature permits us to see in every detail and which intimate historical studies emphasize still more, the hundred-years-socialist-war, as one might style the never discontinued struggle between rivalizing socialist conceptions, began and there is not yet an end to it; on the contrary, what was fought out on paper and by oratory in the beginning, is not fought out by the methods practiced in Russia since the autumn of 1917 and threatens to be so in every other country where material power might fall into the hands of one of the hostile factions which each claim to represent the only true type of socialism.

To this degree socialism is penetrated by authoritarianism, that it tolerates "no other God" besides it and that every fraction really believes that it is possible and necessary to universalize its own opinions, and in this respect it does not matter at all whether it expects to do this by persuasion or by force, for the monstrous thing is the belief itself that ever mankind will accept at the same time one unique system either voluntarily or by submitting to force. Fanat[ic]ism (like patriotism), fashion (appealing to atavistic imitative urges), advertising (practicing every cunning device) may make sweeps of mass sentiments, but socialism, we all agree, stands upon a higher place and requires the conscious consent of all the very best that resides in a man to be of real value and efficiency. It is equally obvious, [6] that public favor, etc. cannot decide the merits of a case, that future developments cannot be foreseen in present or older systems, that isolation, a cause of weakness in every domain, cannot mean strength in the case of some system, which might succeed by hook and crook to oust all other systems and then to domineer in dictatorial isolation. In short, this intolerance is paralyzing and inter-destroying socialism and has done so

all the time. It is moreover a Sisyphus task: Marxism did what it could, to destroy every other kind of socialism and from beginning to end Marx' hand was raised against every other socialist and anarchist, but when it had produced scission over scission and—apart from anarchism which had gone its own way—had made a desert round it of socialists slain or driven away (both on paper only in those mild times of yore), what did happen? It fell to pieces itself (Bernstein and Kautsky, Plechanov and Lenin, reformists, collaborationists, social-traitors, bolshevists right- and left-wing, Trotskyists and whatnot!)...

Well, all this is also a warning to those anarchists who need such a warning. We are fortunate to possess brilliant interpretations of anarchism and conceptions of its future inner working and how it might overcome the obstacles and be first realized by most notable authors and in most cases very militant comrades, by Godwin, Warren, Proudhon, Max Stirner, Coeurderoy, Elisée Reclus, Bakunin, James Guillaume, César De Paepe, Malatesta, Kropotkin, Ricardo Mella, Voltairine de Cleyre, Gustav Landauer, Jean Grave, Sébastien Faure, Pietro Gori, Luigi Galleani, [] Most, Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, Lev Tschornyi, [] besides Leo Tolstoi and other near sympathizers with anti-statism, and this last might easily be lengthened indefinitely by mentioning those who take independent positions in the many discussions on anarchist problems and add something of new value to their exploration, the intellectual debaters on anarchism, as they might be called. Besides every independent comrade has his own opinion upon matters where he has experience or to which he has given special attention.

Does anybody pretend that all these exponents of anarchism agree upon some unique doctrine? Obviously they do not. Does any one imagine that they refute each other in such an efficient degree that a single one or a few nearer related come out mechanically as the winners, just as in a race one of the runners must first pass the post? No doubt, nonentities and minor values are thus eliminated, but I gave here just the very best names, all of which stand upright to this day or are thankfully remembered. Is Proudhon anything the worse, because Kropotkin did not agree with him? Is the collectivism of some a foolish thing, because others are communists? Is individualism wrong, because some do not like or misunderstand Max Stirner? Is communism wrong, because collectivists have raised objections? Nor was a consensus of opinions ever obtained by tacit agreement in the matter here present. Every such affirmation being challenged and every or most of the earlier shades of opinion are still before the public of comrades and new conceptions are being elaborated.

It is our good fortune that we possess this richness of varieties, and this alone is sufficient to remember us of the free play of varieties in an anarchist future when all the now latent forces will unfold and lead their own life, not that decreed for them in the name of some theory. What the future will bring, what often the next day may bring, we cannot foresee and we can best meet it by being prepared for every possibility [] this reason. Otherwise we should be slaves of doctrines and by spreading them intellectual dictators. [7]

This was very clearly seen forty years ago already by comrades, mainly in Spain, who professed then anarchism without an economic epithet (expressing an economic hypothesis), anarchism pure and simple, but their example and advice was disregarded, as every one was proud to proclaim his conviction of the exclusive right value of his particular hypothesis, individualist, collectivist or communist.

Similar initiatives were taken at other times since then and are still under discussion. I see the best sign that this conception makes at least some headway in the recent Declaration of Principles of the American Continental Association of Workers, constituted by the Continental Congress

held in Buenos Aires in May—comprising most country from the Argentine to Mexico—where it is said: “...without recognizing a special form of organization of the future economic relations, [the A. C. A. de Trabajadores] [] recommends communism as that condition which promises the amplest guarantee of social well being and individual freedom.” As to the abolition of the State, the words are, that the Association “demands (quiere) a society of the free and the equal, hence an anarchist society)!... One demands the abolition of a recognized evil (the State), one recommends the economic solution, always a hypothesis, which one considers the best one: this is the right way to proceed and I hope that this example, which is the result of serious thought on the subject, will be followed. We can only recommend, we must never proclaim, decree, dictate.

As we recognize that there must not and cannot be the hegemony of a doctrine, to the exclusion of all others, within socialism, within anarchism, we must also recognize the fact and draw the consequences from it, that during and after a revolution, in a reorganized society, the present varieties of socialist and anarchist opinions will continue and will endeavor to find satisfaction and realizations. It is an idle hope that such differences will vanish like morning mist when the sun rises; experience shows that, even if silenced in short spells of general excitement, they will turn up the more sure the next day and will most likely lead to bitter strike with violent means. We cannot escape from this problem that social changes are aspired by an infinity of elements in all stages of authoritarian and libertarian development and that there will be the most desperate struggle of life between them, if appropriate mutual aid arrangements are not made in time, and this time cannot arrive quick enough, as the task has been neglected for a century; every one always praised his own doctrine or school as the only right one—and there we are, now the field is overcrowded by rivals, there was, when the coronation of socialism seemed to have arrived in 1917 a crash with the weaker trampled upon and destroyed, infinitely more disastrous to the lives of socialists, as the ominous catastrophe on the Chodinskoe Pole was when the last czar was coronated—let it also be the last bolshevism thus coronated at the cost of countless victims! But unless all set to work, similar socialist catastrophes will happen again—one faction will win, all the others will be crushed, and the people will be miserable, and the final outcome....who dares to imagine it?

All this the result of socialist feelings, however noble and lofty by themselves, being combined with an authoritarian will, and authoritarian mentality—and if anarchist feelings are combined with such self-consciousness, intolerance and the will to enforce them as a unique system, the result will be the same. Those who cannot see this, are but skindeep anarchists and are authoritarians from then to the core. Our roads divide and theirs head back to the authoritarian fold.

If any practical conclusions can be drawn from these remarks, [8] in my opinion they would be about the following, expressed briefly as the end of this article must be near.

Freedom is as manifestly a higher and later stage than authority in the development of mankind, as the adult man is higher developed and posterior to the helpless infant. So between both conciliation and fusion are impossible and only some modus on non-interfering convivance (living one aside the other) can at times alternate with the direct struggle. This relative convivance exists even to-day in howsoever precarious forms, when periods of persecution or systematic wholesale denial of all freedom (fascism, bolshevism) do not prevail. Before authority becomes extinct or extremely attenuated in the minds of men, where it is deeprooted, no change for the better can be expected. Meanwhile every particle and shred of libertarian, liberal, humanitarian, social feeling and impulses must be rallied to check the present prominence of authority. This means that we, as anarchists, must not only work for anarchism in general, but

must enter in broadminded contact with all the liberal, nonauthoritarian, voluntaryist consorts everywhere and must try to rekindle the love of, the desire for freedom in the broadest sense.

We must not find an excuse for not doing this, in the incomplete, insufficient, sometimes in our opinion defectuous aspirations of others for any kind or degree of freedom. We ought to remember that our solidarity with labour's present claims and complaints and with every anti-capitalist labour move, however authoritarian, brings us in constant co-operation and practice of solidarity with workers and working class socialists who are bitter enemies of anarchist freedom or do not care a rap for our aspirations. Yet, we do not break solidarity with them, if they act in defense or attack against capital. We own exactly the same degree of solidarity to every liberal cause, as it is an act of resistance or of defiance against authority, against the State, moral prejudice, the slave drivers' and the slaves' mentality.

Individually, no doubt, many anarchists do their best in this respect already now and broaden their sphere of work and help for freedoms. But others are as particular to do nothing of the kind, they sit upon the highest perches, in the most inaccessible ivory towers, in splendid isolation, in immaculate white robes, right as if their mission in life was to be spotless saints, like the anchorites in the desert who squatted on high stone pillars or had themselves immured in cells, so as to shun every contact with the sinful life. Or the group replaces personal isolation, just as the social life of the convent replaced the eremit's narrow cell. This in early Christianity the most sincerely convinced Christians wasted their lives in isolation and the result was that their who church fell into the hands of the vulgar business Christians, and we see the social movements similarly fall into the hands of vulgar professionals, since the best often isolate themselves.

If, then, the anarchists of all shades, and the sympathizers with anarchism, conscious of what their responsibilities are towards the great cause of freedom, so beset by authoritarian enemies in these times, were to deepen their respect for freedom by the practice of mutual tolerance, to broaden their views, to enter into helpful contact with every voice for freedom, however weak and incomplete, they would rouse the sympathies of the best for freedom itself and for their own cause which, properly investigated and known, is that of the most complete and perfect form of socialism. Then this cause, so little known at present, would attract interest and sympathies and then it would begin to grow seriously. Then also the authoritarians, now so much before the world, because the libertarians are so little before it, would loose the support which very many give them just because they see at present so little done on the side of freedom.

Such work must begin within and by ourselves. It is no use to sit by year after year, expecting the tide to turn. In this case we ourselves are the living force which can, which must and which will turn the tide. Let us hope that soon vigorous efforts be made in this direction: things cannot well be let to become worse and worse.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Max Nettlau
Authority and Freedom
In Their Ages-Old and World-Wide Struggle
August 8, 1929

Retrieved on 11th May 2023 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Edited by Shawn P. Wilbur.

theanarchistlibrary.org