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Does Socialism Truly Want to Be International?

Max Nettlau

1920s

This question would appear to be useless after a century of international socialist professions of faith, after the flowering of several Internationals and the struggles of sincere socialists of all shades against nationalism. But it appears to me that it needs to be raised again in some connections, among other that of natural wealth, raw material dependent on the local fertility of the soil and other raw materials so unequally distributed in the subsoil. To whom do these natural resources, whose local distribution is so unequal, belong?—That question applies not only from continent to continent, from country to country, but also within countries, from favored regions to those that are poor. And it is linked to this other question: Is there a desire, or any factor whatsoever, that would be preferable in the distribution of these social riches to the one I have always considered the essence of all sincere socialism, no matter the school: that all monopolies must be abolished and that social wealth belongs to all,—“without distinction of color, creed and nationality,” as the International described the broad sphere

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

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of those towards which one would have as the basis of conduct
“Truth, Justice, Morals.”

If we have not insisted much more on the problem offered by the unequal distribution of natural wealth, it is because a century ago, when socialist ideas, applied at first to arbitrarily constructed utopian societies, were finally applied to the real countries of that era—England, France, etc.—that problem was not as important as it is in our times. We had seen then that for many years, under the pressure of the continental blockade imposed by France under the First Empire, overseas commerce was possible and that the [political] separation of the Americas—first North America, then of all of South America fifty years later—only changed European economic life a very little. In the end, if some important materials came from overseas, like (and above all) cotton, the local monopoly on new factories for the production of textiles in England, Belgium, the north of France and the west of Germany counterbalanced the monopoly of the American producers of cotton. Thus, the unequal distribution of natural wealth was at first a legible factor; it made itself felt much more when fast steamships made practical and inevitable the large-scale importation of food, of wheat and meat;—and it was felt still more when the mines dug in every corner of the globe allowed the circulation of all the minerals, of coal, phosphates, etc., and when the multiplication of machines, of factories, spread everywhere where they were closest to the raw materials, put an end to the monopoly of the favored regions in Europe, where mechanization had been the sole master and world-tyrant just a few decades before.

Today the inequality constantly increases. Against those who take advantage of production made under the most favorable circumstances (natural riches, factories in place, new, rich, unexhausted land, isolated from petty European squabbles, etc.), against these capitalists the old European capitalists defend themselves. This is done through a war of capital, without truce and using all the resources of society. These resources are the whole machinery

In our time these lines of evolution are despised and cast aside. Economic conquest according to the right of the strongest is at the base of all European politics, disguised as the demanding determination of the nations to manage themselves, but also all the so-called historical, strategic or other reasons that serve as pretexts. We know now perfectly—what we did not know in past centuries—to what degree the social life of each region depends on the richness of the subsoil, on the means of communication, etc. and on its power to obtain an equal or normal payment for its exports. We know the thousand methods of hindering the economic life of an enemy country (and what country is not the enemy of all the others?) in times of peace and relative equilibrium, as even in 1914—then the whole process employed unilaterally by the collective victors of 1918 and their postwar associates have naturally succeeded in completely crushing the normal economic life of the vanquished, as we see at any moment in the commercial statistics. There follows from it a growing and in reality absolutely astonishing inequality, perhaps unforeseen by anyone, between Europeans of the victorious and those of the vanquished race and even the losers differ somewhat, to believe the financial pages.

Thus far we have found no other means than to thrust the dagger every more deeply into the chest of the victims and then to twist it a little on occasion, but never to remove it. The result of all that is before us all, let us pay attention like men who see men suffering or let us leave these things aside like the bourgeois politics which could have no interest for us.

or the State—its commercial and labor policies, but also its national and military policies; they also include the manipulation of public opinion by means of national hatred and greed, aroused in the service of capitalism in each country, as well as the conspiracies among States, industrial and military wars under the pretexts most plausible to a public opinion that is always misled, etc. In short, the struggle against that always increasing inequality—a struggle where the weakest, the European then, and the continental above all, can only win ephemeral victories, infinitely too costly and fruitless—that struggle is destined to prevail more and more in the social life of Europe and to exclude from it, to violently chase from it all solidarity, every humanitarian idea, and all hope. Each year that struggle becomes harder, and inevitably manifests itself by the growing separation and hatred among Europeans, since the strongest among them, powerless to triumph against the worldwide inequality, persist that much more, in Europe at least, to compensate at the cost of the weakest in Europe who, according to them, must in any case perish before them, “every man for himself,” the “sacro egoismo” replacing among rivals any sentiment of solidarity—and how could it be otherwise?

So it appears truly useless to try to remedy that situation by some partial means or movement, since the *primary reason*, the unequal distribution of natural wealth, which the universal distribution of productive forces and means of transport produces more definitively and more triumphantly each year—since that *primary reason* becomes stronger every year (something a glance and the agricultural and industrial development of the nations overseas with demonstrate beyond the shadow of a doubt).

What has socialism done in the face of this development of the productive forces of the globe, which is done in the midst of capitalism, and then mitigated or diminished by absolutely no social or solidarist thought? At most, one party of the European capitalists have protected themselves against that evolution by putting money into the creation of new operations in countries overseas: that in-

creases the complications and inextricable intrigues, but it is of no use to the European social body, which suffers from the results of that inequality, if its profit enters the pockets of some capitalists overseas or those of some European shareholders.

European socialism, having originally at its disposal only small forces—moral, intellectual, sentimental and sometimes rebellious forces, but very weak—has had more than enough to do to extend its ranks by the most elementary propaganda, to gather together some worker organizations in order to obtain some satisfaction palliative in the most urgent questions of the conditions of labor and social hygiene, it has then, after some heroic struggles, 1848, 1871, allowed a large portion of its leader to lead it down the dead end path of parliamentary government, etc.,—in short, it has never seriously considered that question, nor any other question that is truly international.

Socialist internationalism was always only, as they say in English, *skin deep*; to be *international* meant, in practice, that no international question was taken up, without being absolutely sure that everyone was in agreement in advance, and that some commonplaces were then repeated. And with the creation of the workers' parties in each country and also of the large trade-union organizations in various countries, socialism was dominated by the masses of voters and of the workers of each trade, with their local demands and expectations, national demands achievable in each State, thus dependent to a great degree on the strength and prosperity of that State, on its superiority over its rivals. That meant, and means, that the interests of the socialist voters and organized workers of each country were and are indissolubly linked to statism, to nationalism, to the capitalist expansion of each country and that socialist internationalism remains a dead letter, a terribly weak factor in the face of a very strong counter-agent.

If things remain this way, the great mass of workers will always remain the diligent cooperators of the capitalists as since 1914 and from 1918 to this day: they have this reality, their country, before

them, while the international idea—its true character, what it could produce—exists only vaguely in their minds, since the real problem, how to eliminate, through solidarity, that inequality and dispersion of the conditions favorable to production, is not posed and no satisfactory solution appears, and indeed quite the contrary.

For this same problem exists within the countries and the solutions that we struggle to give it in our time, or rather the manner in which the strongest exploit that situation, are not stamped principle of solidarity, and thus pull away from internationalism.

In the distant past Europe was made up of numerous little States, territories and cities, each of which provided for its own population or, thanks to some local specialty that they traded, they obtained the remainder of the necessary by the great, time-honored trade routes that branched out everywhere. By a historical evolution that may displease us, but which being an absolutely general fact must have a serious basis, a limited number of large States [were] born of the most aggressive or most materially favored nuclei, and through the situation of these groups of small countries, [they] gradually absorb the small States. This happened in England more than a thousand years ago, in France and in Spain five centuries ago, in Italy in the nineteenth century with the support of liberal opinion the whole world over; in Germany alone that absorption was never complete, and in Austria-Hungary the treaties of 1919 have completely defeated it. There is an obvious differences between these formations that, however disagreeable they are to us as libertarians, have still followed that inherent tendency of every being to grow, to proceed from a small to a larger sphere (and who seriously desires to do the opposite?),—there is a difference between them and the abrupt consequences of a pure and simple conquest; these rapid conglomerations infallibly crumble like the Roman Empire and that of Napoleon I and Turkey, as a continuation of Byzantium, the oriental Rome, has thus had this historical fate.