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More Heretical Views

Max Nettlau

August 1911

To my mind,¹ at least, the more modern Socialism and Syndicalism spread, the more our ideal of many years is left behind, and real Socialism seems more remote than ever. We all feel, I think, that if intensity of feeling and energy for action were in any way corresponding to numerical strength, we should not see, side by side with immense Socialist and Labour Parties, Capitalism more flourishing than ever, monarchism and militarism triumphant, parsons and priests unabashed and prospering. Socialism, degraded to “Labourism,” now forms part and parcel of a system which it once meant to destroy root and branch.

Where is anarchism to come from in such circumstances? Come it will, but it cannot jump into existence on the morrow of a revolution, like a world “created” by a fabulous “God.” Like all living organisms, it must, in my opinion, grow out of slender beginnings to greater strength and perfection. These beginnings must take many forms, as only thus can nuclei of sufficient strength to grow further, and a sympathetic *milieu* for prosperous development, come

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¹ See *Freedom*, January and March, 1910; *Temps Nouveaux*, May, 1909; *Mother Earth*, December, 1907; etc.

into existence. Sapping the belief in authority and that brutal selfishness which the unceasing struggle for a bare living or the natural desire for greater comfort fosters in all of us; encouraging free initiative, mental and moral freedom (preparing economic and political freedom), are some means; others are organisms of proper vitality practising voluntary co-operation and unselfish methods of distribution. All such action brings strength and experience; and these examples of freedom, efficiency, and pleasure combined will attract those who are willing and able to bear and to overcome the initial hardships. In this way Anarchism would grow *in proportion to its own real strength*, being composed only of those who really feel attracted to it.

This seems to me the only possible realisation of Anarchism for some time to come. Can we expect to convince scores of millions of people by mere propaganda, with all the capitalist and Socialist parties doing the same around us on their own behalf? Perhaps our safest hope is the coming decay and discredit of all other parties; and the despairing multitude, aided by Anarchist initiative, might crush organised State power, and efface at last that *resignation to work for others* which is the real foundation of capitalist exploitation. But in this case also Anarchists would find themselves side by side with millions of people who ignore Anarchists and simply are not capable of it or do not want it. What better help against Parliamentary or personal dictatorship, the usual outcome of "anarchy" without Anarchists, could be found than precisely the nuclei and the *milieu* of Anarchist action and of sympathy for Anarchism, centres of attraction, for which I plead and which to so many who firmly believe in the far greater thing, a social revolution *for Anarchism*, appear so utterly impossible. To me, their optimism concerning a far-away possibility of gigantic dimensions, and their pessimism towards a relatively small matter which we all could settle before our eyes if we only began, is a strange spectacle.

I am not saying, of course, that they remain idle, fascinated by the expectation of a far-off social revolution. They drifted into a

on proportion (*ib*, May, 1909), has already approached the subject in a most interesting way.

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The question of *proportion*, only slightly touched upon in the previous remarks, is, in my opinion, of the greatest importance for any future realization of Socialism and Anarchism. The dimensions and the composition of co-operative groups will depend upon it, for a construction on too large or too small a scale would mean waste of energy, failure. Questions of federation and centralisation will be automatically decided by the same criterion as experience may teach in each case. Fourier had all this in mind when he carefully calculated the exact composition of a working unit, a phalanstery. State Socialism looks quite absurd when viewed under this aspect; it is conceivable only as the continuation of present-day wasteful and incompetent State monopoly, which is supported by arbitrary prices and deficits paid out of taxation; when these extraordinary sources of income fail, the impracticability of working on an over-large scale will become patent. A business man calculates the workable dimensions of an enterprise, as an architect bases his plans on the size and quality of building materials, etc. Socialism, to replace these methods of working, will have to do better, and this can never be done when production is regulated from above by official decrees. Any practical man might further work out what I intend to say; he would arrive at an exact proof, comprehensible to practical people, that Socialism and Anarchism *must* begin by small workable groups, which must first, by experience, acquire stability and vitality; then they may enter into relations of various kinds with other groups as the position of affairs may require. I think that the questions of Communism, Collectivism, and Mutualism will also be decided on this practical basis in each case, never by theory—except by amateurs who mean to be such and prefer working harder to a more practical solution, which is their own matter. I should like to see somebody of practical experience examine all Socialist problems in the light of right proportion. Dr. M. Pierrot, of Paris, in the *Temps Nouveaux* during the summer of 1909, in reply to my letter

third way or impasse, which made them simply the left wing of the Labour movement, the advanced fraction of Syndicalism. This gives an illusion of power and apparently scope for vigorous action. But they have simply become the free lances, the *enfants perdus*, of the great Trade Union movement, which is identical with the daily struggle of Labour to advance in order not to be driven back. This unceasing war of two immense armies, capitalists and workers, spread and ambushed over an endless variety of positions in all industrial countries, is evidently a matter by itself, having its own inherent laws, and cannot be compressed into the sphere either of politicians, Socialists, or Anarchists. So-called direct or violent methods—direct action, sabotage, etc.—used in this daily international Labour war do not change its essence by the direction of Anarchism, just as violence employed by soldiers, by *camelots de roi* (French monarchist agents), etc., does not give their cause a revolutionary character.

I conclude that Anarchism has been extremely useful to Syndicalism, but it has received nothing in return but neglect and scorn. Syndicalism goes its own way, and rightly so; if only Anarchists were following this obvious example! Some will say: Are not both going the same way for a long time to come? Both desire the emancipation of Labour, it is true; but *freedom* is the vital point upon which *differ*. To a Syndicalist, e.g., a well-paid municipal worker is an object of satisfaction; to an Anarchist he is but a tool of a new form of general enslavement. Their roads differ and have been differing for years already. For unquestionably Syndicalism enlists the aid of all public powers wherever it can, and Anarchism hopes to see the earth cleared from these powers.

It is a great mistake to confound “direct action” as it is practised in France with Anarchist action. Anarchists would take no notice in France of Government and Parliament; Syndicalists by direct action bring pressure upon them, and make them sanction and *uphold by force* what Syndicalists think right. When it suits them, industries are to be nationalised like the railways in France, because they

find pressure on a Government is easier than pressure on companies. Everything is sacrificed to the immediate interest of Labour; I venture to think that there is a higher interest, namely, that of not strengthening the State, which is a burden and a curse to all. For the State, in its turn, supports private industry, the source of taxation, and everything remains as it is, only the screws have been tightened once more.

Add to this that the primitive natural resources of the earth are being exhausted with alarming quickness (coal, forests, land for agriculture, etc.); that the population is constantly growing and with equal constancy physically degenerating, and vulgarised by the monotonous style of modern life—all this brings about a situation where for some time to come greedy and strong speculators seize, squeeze, and exhaust everything, until what is left or can be rescued from them falls to the State, which will be considered by the masses a public benefactor, a savior from ruin, and will thus acquire power and prestige. Later on, when life upon this overcrowded and exhausted earth becomes more toilsome, the last capitalists and the State, the latter supported by Socialists and Syndicalists, will fight their final battles, and capitalist oligarchy or State omnipotence may follow.

Where will Anarchists be then? If *already at present*, after barely twenty-five years' agitation, moved by a temporary repression (France, 1894), they gave up their independence and for the greater part merged into Syndicalism, nothing will be left of *these* a few years hence, and everything will have to start afresh, as it already does here and there. Political action (Parliament) was the grave of Socialism, Syndicalism is that of the greater part of Anarchism, an inevitable evolution for those in whom the immediate humanitarian desire to do something "useful" or the thirst for the semblance of power was stronger than their love for freedom.

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from the State will appear less eccentric as time goes by. Once free from the idea, which falls little short of megalomania, that each idea which we happen to hold must needs be generalized by unceasing propaganda, which takes up all our time; free also from the sentimental belief that all our efforts must be concentrated on the Labour movement (which is worth our personal support, but not the merging of our ideas into it); free also, I admit, from such personal indignation and horror of the present system, which prefers coming to blows with it rather than going away from it (I respect *both* methods),—those who feel like this and are Anarchists would find in what I propose or discuss no occasion for quietness and lazy retirement, but, on the contrary, for work which some might prefer to many opportunities for talk, the few for action, which the usual movement offers to them.

It is not I who seeks to lessen the dimensions of the Anarchist movement; I see only that it is based on such a high conception of freedom that few can come up to it. Better recognize this fact, which takes nothing away from the value and importance of our ideas, than run after the vain illusion that all others must feel as we do. If land and the supply of necessaries were unlimited, we might expect that freedom would finally predominate in economic and political matter, as it does or is about to do in science, morals, etc. But overpopulation and scarcity of necessaries may bring about a rally of the great majority round the State and authoritarian organisations; therefore it becomes our task to cease to dream of becoming the saviors of all and everybody, and to realize here and now, out of the smallest beginnings, what freedom and unselfishness can do, beside and in spite of all others. A sympathetic *milieu* for the free development of organisms of right proportions, which would not interfere with others and claim the same freedom for themselves—to bring this about, not in one or two isolated places, but everywhere, in the midst of ordinary life, this seems to me a task for Anarchists at least as worth trying as anything that is being done now.

oratory. Of course, everybody may be considered to possess possibilities for development in all directions—towards selfishness or the reverse, towards authority or freedom, etc.; but he alone by his general disposition is able to decide what work or sacrifice development in one of these directions is worth to him, and that settles his attitude towards ideas and systems.

Is my way of looking at things that of despair or resignation? Not to my belief. I want to see things as they are, and not as optimism or persuasion makes them look. Anarchism is equally dear to me whether held by five thousand people or by five hundred millions or by a few individuals. Is a scarce flower inferior to a common one? It is wonderful, perhaps, that after so many dark centuries so many rebellious spirits should exist already; and it is no wonder at all that the dumb, exploited masses, those victims of all ages, should better care for a little immediate amelioration, which State Socialism *promises* to them by an elaborate system of demagogy, than for unfettered personal freedom, which to Anarchists is an essential condition of all personal wellbeing. They follow their way and we go ours.

But they will and do hinder us from living in our own way. Yes, they, the State, the capitalist, fight us *as we fight them*. This struggle to take each other's place will go on to all eternity, unless somebody says at last, "There is room for all; let us only agree not to interfere with each other." Whom but three centuries ago, when Bruno and Vanini were burned, expected that Freethinkers would live, as they do to-day, side by side with religious sects of all descriptions? However strong monarchism was, republics arose by its side; neither could crush the other. Even in economic matters, whilst expropriation of the capitalists is not yet possible by direct means, many thousands found outside of capitalism economic freedom in Co-operation, although this wonderful system has also been spoiled by unlimited extension, which reintroduced some of the evils of capitalism. State interference has become so disgusting to so many that our cry for *total personal separation of Anarchists*

My opinions as here stated were strengthened when I was thinking of the problem of *the right proportion* which is essential to the vitality and efficiency of every organism. A human body cannot live, or become diseased and crippled, if the different organs are not all of proportionate, more or less normal, size, etc., and the extent to which these proportions may be overstepped, by training, etc., is limited. In social matters it cannot well be different; we are, however, mostly believing in almost unlimited extension, that what is good for some may be good for everybody, that by agitation and persuasion almost everything can spread, etc. I consider this a very great mistake which the destructive, degenerating growth of some unhealthy organisms around us led us to conceive. Religious superstition, obedience to authority, submission to work for others were weighing down such masses and ages of mankind that the generous belief and hope arose that the ideas of freethought, freedom, and wellbeing for all could be equally generalized by propaganda and a common revolutionary effort. We forget that many people, most men, are hopelessly crushed and stunned, and but a limited number have a sufficient reserve of strength and energy to regain their lost freedom to any extent. This is an individual matter, and no wave of enthusiasm can sensibly alter the fact that everyone can act only within the limits of his faculties, which are so vastly different.

Socialism has already tried this unlimited mechanical expansion, and failed. To-day, by its catering for the million, it is reduced to an ordinary political party, with voting machinery and politicians ready to become Ministers, the party of taxation and State encroachment *par excellence*. The voice of real Socialism is only heard occasionally in vain protest against this inevitable development.

As to *Syndicalism*, our comrade L. Bertoni, of Geneva, in his address before the Paris Syndicalists (1910), remarked that small revolutionary Syndicates become reformist when they increase in membership. For in a small Union the members are in touch with

one another and with the secretary, who is still one of them; in a large Unit personal contact is less direct, the secretary is a paid official whose chief aim very soon becomes to make the best of his routine job, to make the Union prosper financially by a safe and moderate policy, so that this position should be permanent. He will favor dilatory, opportunist politics; and the members, deprived of their initiative by a gradually more complicated and authoritarian organisation, will lose their personal interest in the Union—and another trade will have been brought under the thumb of dull, slow, and selfish officialdom.

To revolutionize these overgrown Unions is a hopeless task and an endless source of quarrels; just as an insect passes through several forms which cannot be jumped, changed in order, or suppressed, what is right for a small Union must become wrong for a large one, and the sooner this is seen the better.

Again, let us consider the problems of *municipalisation and nationalisation*. We have all heard with admiration of out-of-the-way Swiss villages where forests and pastures are common property, and the inhabitants arrange their public affairs at general meetings, as of old. Here communal property is seen from the attractive side. But look at it in modern big towns: here the inhabitants, save at elections, often fought on side issues, have nothing whatever to say; they must but pay and obey, whilst a rapidly increasing new municipal bureaucracy re-establishes Bumbledom, always quick to refill the exhausted exchequer by increased rates or loans. What was alienated from the people by capitalist usurpation remains equally strange and inaccessible now that it is nominally owned by the people. Everybody's business is nobody's business is the good saying of somebody who had the right proportion of things at heart.

Or look at the *land monopoly*; the land for the people—what movement roused greater sympathies in its beginning! And now it is almost reduced to a dull fiscal problem of taxation which annoys everybody, as, of course, the State, for condescending to realize the

taxation of land values, takes the money and uses it for its own purposes" ships, officials, etc.

Whenever a clever, generous idea is taken from its proper sphere of realization within right proportions and becomes a "movement," it is safe to say that it will degenerate, that the real initiators will fall away, and another routine organisation be created, to the satisfaction of a secretary and a few busybodies, but not to much other good. On the contrary, the limited room is taken up by all these stereotyped organisations, and fresh and free initiative is much more hampered than helped by them. Socialism put in practice in this wholesale, indiscriminate way would be an equal disappointment; it is already proclaimed by Fabians to be a mere matter of certain legislative measures, and no doubt within "Socialism" of this kind room would be found for kings and priests, army and bureaucracy for ever.

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Must we not, as Anarchists, be extremely skeptical of general solutions, just as we reject laws because they are general solutions misapplied to individual cases? Why should we ourselves wish to generalize what reasoning and experience may have shown us to be best for us and our friends? Do we not in our turn decline to be taught by others who offer advice which our ideas make us reject? Just what I most fondly believe in is not likely to attract others who are different from me.

I conclude that every idea, each social, political and other system, can only be in full agreement with the feelings of a *limited* number of people who accept them more or less spontaneously, roused and instructed by propaganda, example, and experience. There is no rule to show which are the proper limits except unfettered spontaneity and the self-restraint of propagandists. Take it or leave it would be, in my opinion, much better guiding lines for the propagandist than the possession of the most persuasive