

# Mutual Toleration versus Dictatorship

Max Nettlau

1921

When a great man dies, the King and the Government of that country usually try to bask a little in his glory by exhibiting their participation in the general grief, and so on. Kropotkin did not escape from this fate, the amazing *dessous* of which are exposed by the letter published in *Freedom* for April. Such a temporary armistice is always followed by a recrudescence of persecutions, and the letter of April 1 (Moscow) addressed to Lenin and all the lending committees in Russia by the Anarchist-Syndicalist publishing, organising, and propagandist bodies of Russia (published in *Freedom* last month) bears testimony of this in a pathetic way. In a subdued tone it merely exposes that publishing houses are closed, comrades arrested, ill-treated in prison, etc.; all this is done to the most moderate groups, evidently bent only on independent Syndicalist organisation and theoretical (or, as they express it, moral) propaganda of Anarchism. These groups doubtless share Kropotkin's standpoint, expressed in all his letters, that Russia must be left alone by the capitalist powers abroad, and there is not the slightest indication either that violence in the interior against the Soviet institutions was ever exercised or planned by this section of the Russian Anarchist movement. They are therefore wantonly persecuted merely to hinder their peaceful propaganda, and the attention drawn to Anarchism by the death of Kropotkin is to be counterbalanced by such moves of the almighty Bolshevist Government and their tools.

Such miserable proceedings have, of course, nothing to do with Communism, and Tsarism and the great American Republic have done the same. The question, however, might be asked of sincere Communists whether Socialism, as they understand it, is at all times to be a unique cast-iron system which excommunicates in theory and crushes in practice any other conception of human relations, be it even Socialism of a slightly differing hue or free co-operation, this modest form which most Anarchism will take when the struggle is over, since Anarchists raise no pretension to govern or to impose their ideas from above. In short, after years of racial and nationalist struggle and butchering, after centuries of religious wars and the scramble for markets, after the culmination of all this in the present ruinous war and ruinous peace, do Socialists of the dictatorial type hold out nothing better to mankind than that this fighting, persecuting, oppressing, and brutalising is to continue; that when the capitalist is eliminated there will always be the Anarchist and the independent Syndicalist to be fought, reduced to silence or crushed, and after these all other heretics will be run down, the shibboleth now being not this or that religious trifle or nationalist pretension, but disbelief in Soviet-ordained Dictatorship and its representatives upon earth, commissioners and secret police and the like?

Such considerations are brushed aside by the stale remark that Dictatorship would only be temporary. History gives an abundance of examples that dictators only care how they can make good for the temporary inconvenience they cause and then retire, does it not? Cincinnatus is about the only proverbially eccentric dictator who acted in this way, but with Caesar the Roman Republic ended for good and the Empire began, and Empires still flourish in our days. And the Norman Conquest, that rather dictatorial solution of the English land question, still holds good, and landlords are not disposed to vanish. Nor is Capitalism, the dictatorship over industrial production, in the least inclined to abdicate. Religious dictatorship established during the first Christian centuries still exists at Rome and in ever so many Greek and Protestant centres, and none of these spiritual rulers will admit that his flock might get along alone after nearly two thousand years of ecclesiastical bureaucracy, priest-rule. After these lofty models the mentality of the Socialist upholders of dictatorship seems to be moulded.

People who are not under the spell of this spirit of domination, imperialist or capitalist, religious or Socialist, as might be the case, but who long to breathe the fresh, invigorating air of the spirit of revolt, look backward and forward to quite another series of historical examples and comrades in the present and coming struggles. Every progress evolved in small circles is hindered by the dictatorial routine of the day. Science is in every field based on the martyrdom of rebels who stood up against the dogmas imposed by the spiritual dictators of each period. Fortunately, such rebels always exist; they rescued mankind from slavery, feudalism, and priest-rule; they will liberate it from Capitalism and Nationalism, from Militarism, and, if needs be, from that curse of a near future, dictatorial Socialism.

We are not at all fanatical believers in the small, the infinitely small, and do not reject generalisations, large-scale measures, but we are guided in our selection exclusively by what each separate organism really seems to require, by the standard of right proportions. We observe in Nature that what is too big becomes unwieldy and nearly as powerless as what is too small. We see how all living organisms are doomed to decay and death if one part of the body overreaches the rest by hypertrophy or infection. In a sound organism all parts *co-exist* in perfect autonomy, not interfering with the remainder, and capable of repelling any interference from them. Unification means death, as in a body overrun by microbes or a field or a barn overrun by rats and mice. And selection, the formation of new types, works by differentiation.

From such considerations which are but alluded to here it is absurd to expect that men will ever submit willingly to a dictatorial regime. Obedience may be enforced as Capitalism, Militarism, and Bolshevism enforce it, by the stupid means of brute force; but mankind will no more abdicate and resign its spirit and intellect into the hands of Lenin and Marx than into those of any Emperor or Pope, military or capitalist leader. There must be resistance and revolt against such pretensions, and there will be.

No dictatorship ever remained unchallenged; sooner or later its brute power diminished, and it had to climb down—with the worst possible grace, but down it came. The Roman Empire went to pieces, the Church must no longer burn heretics, Capitalism is just holding its own against Labour and no longer its absolute master, and Bolshevist Dictatorship is also stronger on paper and in theory probably than in reality. It prefers to leave the peasants alone, it recognises foreign Capitalism, and it may any day compromise with other Russian Socialist parties and parade as a democracy. This means that tyranny is, as always, coupled with inefficiency and blindness, and digging its own grave.

Such a system can have no sympathy with free co-operation, and our comrades in Russia are in a very difficult position. They will not overthrow the prevailing system, because after all it is to a large extent based on the elimination, temporary at least, of private capitalism, and because they will not be masters, dictators in their turn. They do not wish to be degraded by tyrannising over helpless masses by the usual means and methods of government. I believe that all they really require is to be left alone, to work in their own way, but *disposing of a proper share in the common stock of natural riches and means of production*; for these were not created by the dictators in power, but by the work of Nature and past and present generations of men, and, once wrested from the capitalist monopoliser, *should be at the disposal and in the hands of every section of anti-capitalist bona-fide producers*.

There is some very old misunderstanding in this respect which ought to be cleared up at last. It is quite natural that each school of Socialists, believing in the superiority of its particular tenets, should wish to expand, and it is but human that it should think that its gospel should spread generally and the Social Revolution and new appropriation be made in its favour. Hence nearly all propose to do everything and only a few, co-operators and communitarian experimentalists, confine themselves to their own self-acquired means and self-accepted limits. Hence the Socialist movement became a race where the winner pockets everything and then locks out and scorns his former comrades. Dictatorship against Capitalism, then, is only a pretence to cover this monopolist lock-out of all other Socialist and Anarchist comrades, and this abominable selfishness leads to persecutions, to cruelty and murder of every description, to the murder of comrades by comrades, as in Russia, Hungary, and Germany these late years. And this pandemonium of brutality, inspired by the war, gives the capitalists new hope of discrediting and ruining Socialism for a long time to come, and they send out their White Guards and Fascisti, their Labour spies and other Black and-Tans; and Socialism to-day, where it is not undermined by mutual abuse, distrust, and other factors, is a shambles and almost physically at the mercy of capitalist cutthroats. It is impossible for me to imagine that it could be degraded still further, and I question whether this will not open the eyes of some and induce them to make a stand and try to improve matters.

---

What might be the basis of such action?

I have not foreseen the present crisis, but I have felt for very many years that no single Socialist system can expect to be generalised—except possibly after a long period of free experimentation—and that therefore all systems must agree to *co-exist*, each within its natural sphere, under *mutual toleration*.

A special system can only be introduced and maintained by dictatorial force, which is bound to make it so odious that its possible advantages, which free experimentation would show, are not properly appreciated. This is happening to the Soviet system, since it permitted adulteration by dictatorship. If those in power refuse to others the means of free experimentation, they act as usurpers of social wealth which should be accessible to all, and it matters little whether they withhold this wealth from others as capitalists or as “Socialists.” A unique economic system never existed; even Capitalism lived side by side with early Collectivist and feudal relics and new Co-operative and Socialist growths. Dictatorial Socialism would have to co-exist in any case with many other tendencies which, as latent enemies, would undermine and sap it. Would it not be better to give them elbow-room for friendly emulation?

This question was seldom discussed by Socialists, because the interests of propaganda always seemed to dictate the assertion that the particular movement alone was right, that all others were hopelessly wrong, and that giving way to toleration meant laxity and almost a betrayal of the cause. The very foundation of all co-operation was ignored by this sort of reasoning, for co-existence in friendly co-operation means not a loss but an increase of strength.

It is, therefore, not quite easy to retrace the history of the idea of mutual toleration within the Socialist and Anarchist movements, for most writers appear before the public but as zealous propagandists, eager to advance the cause in hand, and they leave toleration for private use at home in intimate reflections. Some are so ardent that to tolerate anything side by side with the truth they proclaim appears to them the worst of crimes. Some few only are coolheaded and see a bit further ahead.

In 1860, by the way, a forgotten Belgian author, De Puydt, not a Socialist himself, elaborated the whole idea in full, calling it *Panarchie*.

At the close of the eighties Communist Anarchism in Spain tried hard to supersede Collectivist Anarchism, and as a young movement was very intolerant. Comrade Tarrida del Marmol, then editor of the Barcelona *Productor*, said and wrote golden words on the necessary co-existence of both economic hypotheses believed in by various fractions of Spanish Anarchists. Tarrida then created the term “Anarchism *sans phrases*,” or “Anarchism without a label,” to which he always adhered.

About that time Malatesta, returning from South America, in the *Appello* of the “Associazione” (his paper, 1889) and elsewhere stood up for the friendly co-existence of both sections of Anarchists.

Little further was said on the subject, and readers of Freedom early in 1914 may perhaps remember my effort to bring about an understanding between Individualist and Communist Anarchists, an abortive effort crushed by an avalanche of protestations from both sides, each feeling perfectly comfortable in its isolation and exclusive belief to be in the right.

It was some little comfort to me when I saw Malatesta, in his articles in *Umanita Nova* (1920), uphold and proclaim this principle of co-existence and mutual toleration in relation to the Italian Anarchist and Communist parties. Malatesta was the first Anarchist who then was for a time confronted by this problem in an actual and urgent form. The Italian workers seemed disposed to overthrow the old order by a joint effort, and Anarchists, Communists, Revolutionary Socialists, and Syndicalists were all expected to do their best. Should, then, a single party—the Communists, for example—reap the fruits of a joint victory? Their dictatorial leanings were not averse to this. Malatesta told them plainly that the Anarchists were not willing to submit to this, and offered them friendly co-existence without interference from either side, on the common basis of a society without private capitalism. Circumstances prevented further development, but these words stand as a lasting expression of Anarchist thought: *Co-operation with all in the struggle against Capitalism—co-existence with all anti-capitalist parties on the basis of mutual toleration, non-interference, and friendly behaviour*. I trust that the proposed International Anarchist Congress in the coming autumn will further elaborate this point.

The question how in such cases the spheres of each group or movement shall be defined and circumscribed is a very serious one. This question would require careful consideration beforehand, preliminary studies, and yet permits no definite arrangements, since the real situation at a given moment cannot be foreseen. In any case, study and discussion are always useful, and may clear away many misunderstandings. The events from 1917 onward, as those of 1914, found so

many Socialists entirely unprepared that ignorance and lack of quick understanding were at the bottom of many mistakes made by them. Everybody was trained only to grasp at everything for the benefit of his own party, and the comrade from whom he was divided by the slightest shade of opinion became in the twinkling of an eye the enemy who must be put down, exterminated if possible. All have therefore to gain by a proper discussion of these subjects on the basis of fair minded and friendly mutual understanding.

I venture to think that since friendly co-operation, or at least autonomous co-existence, with Socialists of other opinions would be the purpose, every grasping party would soon be found out and its aims frustrated; all would be driven by their own interest to show at their best and to do the best. Questions which cannot be settled can always be set aside, neutralised by common consent. It would be excellent if these neutral spheres had a large extension, for here would be some common ground where all should meet; and if rivalry and struggle must follow after all, some important domains would be saved from ruin. What is generally accepted to-day as to hospitals, monuments, art collections, &c, should be extended to predominance in capitals and large towns and other vantage positions which were created by Nature or are the work of past generations, and should never be controlled by single sections of public opinion. In this spirit the outlines and principal features of future co-existence of Socialist and Anarchist parties and groups might at least be discussed and the minds of people prepared for mutual goodwill.

Between Anarchists in Communist prisons as in Russia, Socialists done to death by Fascisti in Italy, Syndicalists murdered in Spain, all three shades of authoritarian Socialists killing each other in Germany, and so in, my idea or suggestion sadly lacks "blood and guts," and I am well aware that this drawback does not recommend it. This cannot be helped, but plenty of blood may still flow, stakes may possibly be lighted, before it may be taken into consideration. Authority dies hard and is constantly finding a new refuge; dispossessed in its religious disguise, neatly found out under the capitalist mask, it found fresh shelter under the wings of Socialism of the dictatorial type, which is such a wonderful godsend to the bureaucracy, to all those who as a body form the State and are at the service of all who pay them.

This stage of human folly will also be overcome and the sphere of Authority reduced once more. Anarchists should make an open and bold stand now; their case was never better, Authority was never more discrediting itself. I am really glad that the Russian comrades have spoken up at last. Let all the world hear as much as possible about Anarchism; after all which happens we are sure to be always better understood by the disenchanted victims of this accursed system of society.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Max Nettlau  
Mutual Toleration versus Dictatorship  
1921

Retrieved on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2023 from [www.libertarian-labyrinth.org](http://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org)  
Published in *Freedom* (London) 35 no. 385 (July, 1921): 42–44.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**