

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



On Centralization

Max Nettlau

1909

I am happy that someone has finally thought about *proportion*,¹ which, in my opinion, holds the true, practical (automatic, so to speak) solution of the differences between centralization and decentralization. The problem remains complicated nonetheless, for proportion is not a single, unchanging term. I mean that for every organism there must be a certain *minimum* of proportion in order for it to be *viable*, and beyond that, it is possible, a higher degree of proportion in order for that organism to be at least as durable, progressive, etc. as others. We have only to think of the monstrosities that are not viable and of human beings, some of whom are so deformed

Max Nettlau
On Centralization
1909

Retrieved on 11th May 2023 from
www.libertarian-labyrinth.org

Published in *Les Temps Nouveaux* 15 no. 1 (May 15, 1909): 2–3.
Working Translation by Shawn P. Wilbur.

theanarchistlibrary.org

¹ This letter was written following a discussion at the group of Les Temps Nouveaux on centralization. It was not destined to be published, but the comrades who were aware of it thought there would be great interest in having it appear in the paper. The discussion had started from this point that if an economic organization (or some other) gains in strength through the division of labor and a certain degree of expansion (ex.: small stores), there comes a moment when the benefit is destroyed more and more by waste, the result of too great complexity of the mechanisms and the general disproportion of the enterprise (ex.: laarge insurance companies, cooperatives, etc.) N. D. L. R.

that we are astonished to see them get by and vegetate all the same (but this is not true life.)

In the same way, we see, in Society, so many defective institutions also drag along their lives. But, in thinking of the future Society, we set aside these debris, which lead an artificial life through efforts outside of themselves, and we think of living and effective organisms—that is why *proportion* must be the essential condition of these new organisms.

I believe—without having read the details—that Fourier was very concerned to seek the proportion for a productive and consumptive organism and that he arrived at phalanxes of 1000 to 1200 persons, as being best able to be self-sufficient.

That is only one hypothesis. Since then, so many attempts at communist colonies and other examples have at least shown that a much more limited number of men is too small and is not effective, nor even viable. On the other hand, the overly large associations for cooperation show themselves as organisms without real life, as sterile and without interest: here, the ensemble completely escapes the individual, while in the little group the ensemble is too close to it and the individual sees its coils and secrets too clearly.

Let us take the example of present-day production from the point of view of the one who has the greatest interest in that production: it is the capitalist (tomorrow, it will be the public). If his establishment is too small, he is absorbed by his industry, knows nothing else, becomes a being entirely out of proportions, confined to his shop. If the establishment is of suitable proportions, and, without allowing him to live without doing anything, does not absorb him completely, that would be best. If the establishment is too large, either he applies all his forces there and truly becomes its slave, or else the establishment escapes him and will be steered by paid directors who are more or less indifferent, as is already the case with all the joint-stock associations, where the shareholders, whatever is said, are powerless before an administration that thinks of itself first.

The appropriation of *social* wealth by the *individual* Syndicates would be a similar *coup d'état*, a strangling of all socialism. And we seem to march joyfully towards this disaster, just as during the Revolution they were content in France to see the growing force of the armies — until the moment when we feel their claws at our throat.

And it is rather odd and rather sad to see the bitter enemies of braided militarism fall for this new civil militarism.

I want, in summary, to say two things: that appropriation by the Syndicates is the negation of socialism, and that in order to reorganize production and consumption it is necessary, above all, to pay attention to *proportions*.

That organization demands full liberty, the liberty of trial and experiment, as it exists in science; which means that it is possible only in *anarchy*, and that it is a question then of *generalizing* that liberty that science, art, and thought have already acquired, and to work according to it on the political and social field.

The Syndicates have their importance in order to eliminate the bosses, etc., by some great blows. But after the struggle they should dissolve and join with the free organisms (cooperatives for production, etc.), already created or only in the process of creation, to let ourselves be overrun by the Syndicates would be a true disaster. So there is, more than ever, reason to strive for true anarchy.

— M. NETTLAU.

As for the worker, a labor that he follows closely, like that of past times, could and should interest him. Work in large industry, where his labor is often only partial and often repeated, can no longer interest him. It is only when he sees the whole and the aim before him that interest is recovered.

It results from the present system that personal interest in production disappears, and this is an evil, because it implies the degradation of labor. We want a society where labor does not make itself felt as a sad and hard necessity, but one where it will be the satisfaction of the healthy man's natural need for activity. For that, it would be necessary that each once again lives their labor and find interest there. The proportions, the dimensions will be very important in this recovery of labor.

The maintenance of large-scale industry, even under the pretext of economizing on labor, will again separate the worker from the work; the indifference will persist, and then there will be a lack of care for the administration of each industry, waste, etc.

So if the Syndicates took possession of the factories, tools and materials of their present trades, it would be disastrous: they would simply *continue* a system that we want to destroy; it would only be a change of proprietors. In America, for the various branches of production, everything passes through the hands of the *trusts* of the capitalists — in revolutionary France, it would be the *trust* of the workers; in both cases it would be a group of pure interests that sets itself up opposite everyone.

This is what the peasants have done for a long time with a great success in various countries: agreement of the peasants and great proprietors, the agrarian parties are in reality business parties who only do what all the Syndicates do, sell their products at the high price possible, without considering the general interests at all.

We have always taken for the essential characteristic and defect of the present social system that the individual interest (of persons or groups, it is the same thing) tramples under foot

the general (collective) interest, and the safeguard of the (collective) interest is the first word of all socialism. From that, it seems to me to follow that the project of an appropriation of everything by the respective Syndicates remains on the terrain of the present Society and distances itself from all socialism; for it will be a new division of social wealth between various groups: from the capitalist *trusts* we will pass to the worker *trusts*.

I am told that from there we will pass more swiftly to what we truly desire. That remains to be proven and debated; for we can also very well think that this hoarding, monopolist syndicalism will disgust the world so much with collective efforts that we will fall back into a fierce selfishness that will lead to a new enslavement of the weak.

As for *proportion* in production, this syndical system seems to me to pull away from it more than ever. If syndicalism accomplished that appropriation (something I do not believe in the least), the syndicalist sentiment would be so developed (by struggle) in the members that it is difficult for me to see with whom one would deal on an equal footing. Such a “patriotism” of the group would be created that the feeling for general interests would be very much weakened.

If then, for the exchange of products, one trade dealt with another, there would always be one that was stronger and one weaker — who would yield? — or else each trade should deal with one collectivity — which? The commune — but it is a local collectivity, very weak in comparison with the trade; what, for example, could any commune do against the immense group represented by the miners? So then the municipalities [communes] lead to federate and to deal collectively with the large trade associations of producers? That would bring us back to what we have today: the State (call it what you wish), the collectivity, against the syndicates; that would be the struggle.

Likewise, such a system will render difficult a more *economical* production, one sparing useless efforts. There are many useless or barely useful trades that no one would dream of, if

it was a question of reorganizing production on a reasonable and proportional basis, but which, but if they were supported by syndicates would wish to remain and survive.

It is not non plus to suppose that a syndicate (a new little State, with all the peculiarities of a State), would reduce itself voluntarily, for it would lose influence; it would have, on the contrary, the same interest that the capitalists have today who want to sell; it would consider its products indispensable. In general, such an organism has never gone away on its own: it is there, it remains and it tends to extend itself; the State has done it and the syndicate will do it.

And yet in reality the syndicate is only the inevitable grouping for the collective struggle against the equally combined strength of the bosses. But after the victory, its reason for being ends, like that of an army after a war. Now, we presently see that the armies do not disappear after the war, that there is always the pretext of a possible future war. And the syndicates, will not go away either to make place for the free groupings that, through essay and experiment, will strive to find the true proportions essential for every organism.

You have, yourselves, spoken recently about this similarity with the armies. I think of this fact often: alongside the French Revolution, which dreamed of the common good for all (as today we dream of socialism, anarchy), grew the armies of the Revolution, which, certainly, would save it from invasion and crushing, and which in that sense would be infinitely useful (as syndicalism is for the defense of the workers against the bosses). But little by little the armies act for themselves; they make wars of rich conquest, and in France they let it be. The moment would inevitably arrive when the army, in the person of one of its leaders (if it had not been Bonaparte, we would have had Pichegru, Moreau or some other), lays their hands on the country and establishes their dictatorship by strangling the Revolution.