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The Case of Gustave Hervé

Max Nettlau

1912

Considerable surprise and ill-feeling were created by the news that Hervé, the editor of the Paris *Guerre Sociale*, hitherto believed to be an uncompromising antipatriot, antimilitarist, and insurrectionist, was, since his recent release from prison, working on much more moderate lines, apparently renouncing his former opinions and methods. When he proposed to state his standpoint and to give his reasons to an immense Paris audience at the Salle Wagram (September 25), some denied him a hearing, and a great row ensued. He has now lectured in London (Shoreditch Town Hall), and also spent an evening at the Communist Club, Charlotte Street, explaining more intimately the reasons for his new attitude. The latter meeting really became a debate between Hervé and comrade Malatesta, both stating their cases repeatedly at full length and fighting it out to the bitter end. As no notes were taken, I can only rapidly summarise the principal arguments, and am alone responsible for mistakes or omissions. To be fair to Hevré, his own writing should be consulted, mainly *Le Guerre Social*, the preface to his book, “Mes Crimes” (My Crimes; or Eleven Years of Prison for Press Offences), published last winter, and the report of his Salle Wagram speech, “Notre Patrie” (Our Country). I shall first summarise this speech,

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which was the basis, though enlarged by many details, of the statement given at the Communist Club on October 24.

In his prison retreat, seeing social and Nationalist reaction on the rise, which only those who are blind do not see, he asked himself whether he had not unwittingly contributed towards this development by some mistakes on his part. He thinks now that certain strong language in which he had indulged was cunningly exploited by the bourgeois press to frighten people and prejudice them against Socialism, *e.g.*, his dictum that the national flag belonged to the dungheap, a remark which created such furious animosity against him. "Antipatriotism" also was an expression which to him meant that he denied any solidarity with feudal and bourgeois France, the country of the rich, of strike massacres and colonial brigandage; but it did not mean indifference towards revolutionary France, the country of the peasants' revolts, of the Great Revolution, and of so many other struggles for freedom. He wanted compulsory arbitration between States, even in questions affecting national honour; States refusing arbitration were to be placed outside the pale of humanity, and, in case of war, insurrection against them would be the most sacred duty.

He had always belonged to the Socialist Party, which meant to achieve its aims by the vote, if possible; by revolutionary action, if necessary.—To oppose those Socialists who believed exclusively in Parliamentary means, he had formerly depreciated the vote; but he saw now that the Radical Party, brought into power by the vote, had wrung the school from the clergy and disassociated the Church from the State; after this, he ceased to believe in the absolute inefficiency of the vote to bring about reforms. A radical reform of military service might be obtained in a similar way, supported by the mass of peasant voters. A strong Socialist press might also be created by steady efforts.

No revolution, political or social, was ever victorious without the Army or against the Army (2789, 1830, 1848, the Commune, Portugal, China, Russia), hence the most urgent revolutionary need of

the hour is the conquest of the Army. The social revolution will be made with the help of the Army, or it will not be made at all; new massacres will mark the new efforts. The General Strike is no more a panacea than the vote; it can create a revolutionary situation, it cannot carry it through. Hence he opposes those who preach desertion from the Army to all revolutionists. Hervé admits desertion only in the case of Syndicalists, etc., being threatened with the horrors of service in the penal settlements in Africa, as provided by Millerand's recent infamous law; in that case he cries openly to them: "Desert, desert, desert!" In all other cases revolutionists ought to serve in the Army and become as efficient as possible, to be able to give a good account of themselves on the day when the Army is to be used against the people.

At the Communist Club, Hervé explained that at the end of 1906, when in prison, he conceived the idea of a revolutionary organization for real action on Blanquist lines, comprising Socialists, Anarchists, and Syndicalists, with ramification in the Army. *La Guerre Sociale* was started, he and his fellow editors soon finding themselves in prison again. When liberated early in 1909, the time for action seemed to have come. "Mademoiselle Cisaille" (Miss Scissors) made her appearance during the postal strikes, cutting wires to her heart's desire. On the night of Ferrer's death, before the Spanish Assembly, the police got their heads broken as never before. Hervé was soon confronted again with prison, having taken up the defence of the victim of police infamy, Liabeuf. He tried, early in 1910, to form a distinct Revolutionary Party; but could not obtain the help of the Anarchists, as he was, from reasons to be explained, opposed to an anti-electioneering propaganda at the forthcoming General Election. The railway strike found him already in prison (Autumn, 1910); he was cut off from all communications for a week or so, whilst otherwise during all his prison years he was, of course, as a French political prisoner, in full and continuous contact with his friends, writing for his paper, etc.; he even manage (I should like to add) to commit new offences, undergo new trials,

have years added to his sentence, etc., all whilst in prison, where indeed, as nothing in the way of freedom could be taken away from him, he behaved as the freest man in France. The failure of the railway strike made him reflect; the growing wave of Caesarism, of Governmental Nationalism, added cause for reflection; and he is now determined to use those methods described in his Salle Wagram speech.

He will not advocate the vote, nor become a candidate himself, an opportunity so often offered to him, and which would have saved him from prison; but he will ignore this question, and thus have immense Socialist audiences which formerly boycotted him. The peasants in the Yonne department, in particular, would never understand that they must not vote for Socialists, and thus permit the bourgeois to carry the elections; this did not prevent them seeing the necessity of revolutionary action. He also deplors the division of the antimonarchical forces in countries like Russia or Spain, where the maintenance of Tsarism and Alfonsism is due to the absolute unwillingness of Socialists, Republicans, and Anarchists to co-operate temporarily for the downfall of monarchy.

Enough has been said to describe Hervé's views, which he put forward, amidst interruptions, in a serene, often good-natured way.

Malatesta opposed him in several long speeches brimming with recollections of his own revolutionary career, past and present. His main point was the absolute incompatibility of propaganda for the *vote* and the preparation of revolutionary action at the same time. Those who believe in the vote will always wait to see its effects, and never resort to revolutionary action. Again, co-operation with other parties, Socialists and Republicans, has been tried over and over again in Italy and Spain, and always failed, the bourgeois deserting the common cause. Malatesta was strongly influenced by the case of Andrea Costa, once the pride of the Italian Internationalists (who all exclusively prepared insurrectionary movements, and whose plain language was well understood even by the peasants and soldiers, without special diplomatic moves for their use).

that the noisy monarchist propaganda (*camelots du roi*) is almost silent under the present Ministry, which does sufficient work to undermine the Republic *from within*. Many people are blind to this, or play with the fire. Syndicalists, to emphasise their hostility to the Government, often pretend to be indifferent as to a monarchical restoration. I know that they are not; but all the same these inconsiderate remarks prepare the ground for the working classes' abstention in the case of a *coup d'état*, as they did abstain, prepared by almost similar maneuvers, in December, 1851. The Clericals do what they can to bring on this monarchical restoration, to take revenge for their elimination from education so far as this goes. Hervé is feeling all this strongly, and wishes to make the masses understand this before everything—Socialism, Syndicalism, Anarchism—is crushed by a triumphant military and clerical monarchy. He is really the only man who can do this; the Socialist Deputies are discredited as “15,000-francs-salary-people”; the Syndicalists are absorbed by their daily struggle, or ignore dogmatically anything outside of economics; the Anarchists will not go out of their way to save the State, even if worse were to come. Hervé alone tackles this task, which all others refuse to handle, and which is vital to all.

Is it then wise to aim to destroy him? Up till now his good humour has not left him, and he speaks of Anarchism with that sympathy and respect which almost all other Socialists known in public life refuse to it. Black and white are the colors of dead books; life is more diverse and brighter coloured than books and pamphlets; and there is room for all. Anarchists ought to be the first to admit this.

Costa's conversion to Parliamentarism at the end of the “seventies” did much harm to the Italian movement. Malatesta had also witnessed, about 1880, in Paris, the beginnings of French Parliamentary Socialism, when its initiators apparently only accepted it as a means of propaganda and protest, whilst long since, like Costa, they were completely absorbed by it (*vide* the Labour Party). All this, said Malatesta, augured very badly for Hervé's evolution, of which Hervé himself saw only the beginning, whilst the example of so many others is there to show where such efforts to compromise and to conciliate things which cannot be conciliated usually lead.

Blanqui and Mazzini both adopted revolutionary means exclusively; they did not think of resorting to Parliamentarism at the same times. Desertion is no general remedy, of course. If all Italian, all French, all Spanish revolutionists deserted, in ten years they would all be outside their own country, powerless exiles. But special military propaganda in Hervé's case is useless; the Army will always be the enemy; and Portugal and Turkey were not examples which would interest Anarchists and the workers. Hervé's niceties about the flag of Valmy as different from that of Wagram were historic trifles; what matters is the flag of the present Army which shoots down strikers and serves for colonial conquests—this flag under all conditions belonged to a worse place even than the dungheap.

Hervé could not see Malatesta's point, and refused to be stuck on the horns of his dilemma: vote *or* insurrection, ballot *or* bullet. He explained his standpoint by practical references to the situation in France, and here the discussion practically ends. Hervé not storming Malatesta's abstract position, and Malatesta not storming Hervé's practical position, both may claim a victory, Malatesta brilliantly upholding theory, Hervé pluckily upholding practice. As Hervé is a Socialist, and Malatesta an Anarchist, no other issue of the struggle was possible. The discussion was, indeed, full of interest, and must have made the audience think for themselves. May I

be permitted to add some personal reflections to this very imperfect report?

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As an Anarchist, I differ entirely from Hervé's social ideal, which coincides with that of many Syndicalists, viz., an industrial Parliament of the delegates of all Syndicates constituted for production and distribution, as the supreme authority of a new society. I consider also that effort recently made by an Anarchist writer of renown, Charles Albert, to find the alleged common ground between Anarchists and Authoritarian Socialists is a failure (vide Charles Albert et Jean Duchêne, "Le socialisme révolutionnaire : son terrain, son action et son but," Paris, 1912, reprinted from *Le Guerre Sociale*). But that does not prevent me from seeing that there is room for Hervé's activity even as modified at present, because there are large numbers of people to whom this kind of action appeals, and no other one. It does not matter whether I like or dislike this fact; I have to recognize it.

Seen in the dark, there seems to be but darkness and light; seen in the light of day, there are seven colours and an endless variety of intermediate shades between them; so are men. They are not, for the greater part, cast-iron individualities of definite, unalterable opinions. The Socialist movement, including the Anarchist, is so young that we can retrace most of its history; starting from very simple conceptions, unalterable tents, constituting schools and sect, by and by it became broader, more differentiated, which is a splendid sign of vitality. Between the Anarchist and Parliamentary Social Democrat, the two extremes, there is now an immense intermediate field occupied by Syndicalists and revolutionary Socialists. Anarchists who strictly confine themselves to Anarchist propaganda use this field as a hunting-ground for new converts, and they are right. But does this mean that those who are inaccessible to this propaganda are to be considered as mere refuse? We are not so critical where Syndicalists are concerned; these are all welcome, and yet the most revolutionary Syndicalist constantly

wavers between legal and illegal action. He accepts anything that is given him by law, as this saves personal effort and energy for other struggles which have to be fought by direct action of some kind. Is he any the worse for it? He cannot choose his methods, or he will be a dogmatic failure. In the same way endless numbers of Socialists cast a vote when occasion arises, and are ready for action of another kind if opportunity offers; and as they, as workers, practically coincide with the Syndicalists, they have plenty of use for direct action, and act accordingly.

If I, as an Anarchist, have little taste to have anything to do with these less advanced people, I am the more glad if anybody with less prejudice, like Hervé, does this work of inspiring revolutionary feelings in this non-described mass which wavers between the poles of Social Democracy and Anarchism. Hervé has gone so far, at other times, in the revolutionary direction that I see no reason to fight and destroy him because he chooses to walk a little in the other direction. As a Socialist (who never pretended to be an Anarchist), it is his right to do so. His reasons are not difficult to see; no one had the ear of the masses and their sympathy in recent years like he had; no one addressed such bold appeals to revolt as he did; yet he was *not* listened to sufficiently, everything came to a standstill, or is going back, unfortunately. To go further ahead would more and more isolate him, and so he *tries* his new tactics—the result remains to be seen. Hervé, however, has so much stood alone and acted by himself that I doubt whether he has the slightest desire to merge into any of the old parties; this would be an act of self-destruction from which commonsense will preserve him.

There is this motive underlying Hervé's present action, that he really considers everything in France threatened by the present Nationalist and perhaps forthcoming monarchical reaction. Briand, the Minister, is supposed to be working for Victor Bonaparte. Millerand, the old Boulangist and Minister of War, is stirring up Nationalism, fostering the spirit of militarism as no one ever did since the days of the Empire. It is very significant