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Municipal Socialism

Pëtr Kropotkin

1902

In the early beginnings of *Freedom*, some sixteen years ago, there was in our paper an article, entitled 'Local Action', which attracted at that time a good deal of attention in Socialist circles. Till then, the workers had been told that the socialisation of the factories, the mines and so on, could only be accomplished by the State, by an Act of Parliament. However, the Paris Commune had commenced, since 1871, a new era of *communal* revolutions. It had indicated to us that, in all probability, the Social Revolution would begin in many points of every territory at once. A number of Communes would start it themselves, on their own account; and they would socialise their dwelling-houses and their riches, without expecting that all the nation should be ready to do the same thing; they would rely on the force of example for convincing the citizens of other cities that their action was reasonable. And, of course, they would federate as soon as they would have broken the capitalist yoke in their own city.

Starting from this idea, so popular with the Latin nations, our writer indicated the absolute necessity of *local action* since the very beginnings of the revolution. Without local action the revolution of the twelfth century would never have taken

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place. Without the *local* expropriation of the land in the village Communes of eastern France, and without the *local* revolt of so many French cities in 1789 the great French Revolution also would not have taken place. Destroy the monopolies first. Make a new start in your own place; and then only can you see how much and how far the others will be ready to follow you. This is how the Social Revolution will proceed in Latin countries.

English workingmen also liked the idea. In fact, it was evident to the workingman reader that if Bristol, Glasgow, Leicester, Manchester, and so on would begin to socialise wealth – without waiting for orders from Westminster – the chances of a Social Revolution would be immensely increased. The best-intentioned revolutionary Convention would find its task wonderfully simplified if many cities started the expropriation and took possession – here of the docks, there of the city lands, there again of the mines, and so on.

Sixteen years ago, English workers and even their leaders dared and liked to talk of the Social Revolution. However, owing to many reasons, the revolutionary wave, which ran high in 1886, fell flat; and we have since entered a period of trifling, partial improvements, and of prudent experiments, which have only a certain educational value. Amongst these experiments the so-called Municipal Socialism – that is, the municipal supply of various commodities – occupies the most prominent place. It has taken lately a quite unexpected extension in all countries, and every year it widens its sphere of action. We have now municipal gas, water and electricity; the municipal supply of motive power; municipal farming – Torquay, for instance, keeps its rabbit farm and its dairy farm; we have municipal ownership of docks, at no smaller a port than Liverpool. Besides, municipal ownership and working of coal mines is coming; thus the Manchester corporation, which supplies electric motive power to a very great number of factories and workshops, had to pay lately so much for coal, that the ques-

the organisation, first of all, of the *Consumption of goods on Communistic principles*.

This is the lesson which we can borrow from the experiments that have been made up till now in so many Continental, British and American cities.

Freedom 172

December 1902

tion of buying coal mines for the town is already a mere matter of time and of a favourable opportunity. And, finally, we have, in addition to town libraries and schools, municipal dwelling-houses, which will necessarily lead to the distribution of hot water, and open the way to municipal catering – probably in connection with co-operative stores. In fact, the feeding of the children in the day schools is already done by several municipalities in France.

Of course, all these are mere experiments, and no city has yet gone beyond the experimental stage; but they are interesting for us in that they so well confirm the Anarchist conception of how the Social Revolution will probably proceed. One of our main points is that each city will have to, itself, take the initiative of Socialistic expropriation and that the first duty of every revolted city will be to organise *the supply, by the Commune, of all the first necessities of life*: dwellings, food, and essential clothing. Not to start with *the organisation of labour*, as Louis Blanc said in 1848, because that would lead to an unavoidable failure; but to start with *the organisation of supply*. Satisfy, first, everyone's primary needs, so that nobody should be compelled to undersell his forces to a boss, and then organise production in accordance with the needs. This is the only means to really break the yoke of the capitalist system. *Socialised consumption* of goods will be the distinctive feature of the new non-Capitalist Society, and socialised production will be its necessary outcome, – but not the reverse. Go straight for Communism – at least in all essential, primary needs – this is what we shall have to do in order to secure success.

And this is also the lesson which the development of the last sixteen years gives us. The only object-lesson worth speaking of which we got for the last sixteen years from those who undertook to render Revolution useless – this one lesson was given by the cities, not by the States. The cities have shown us that the rational way to proceed is just the one that we indicated; namely, to satisfy the needs of the population – some of

them, at least – and this will necessarily bring them to the necessity of starting municipal production: to have, for instance, mines and to work them in order to supply coal and motive power at cost price.

Of course, no reasonable man will expect that Municipal Socialism, any more than Co-operation, could solve to any extent the Social problem. What is being done, and this is all that can be done, is mere experiment, mere object-lessons on a small scale.

Indeed, it is evident that every step in so-called Municipal Socialism renders the following steps more and more difficult. The days are not far off when all such attempts will run against a dead wall of landlordism which will have to be broken by force. It was already pointed out in these columns how the very fact of Woolwich having a successful Co-operative Society and an enterprising town council contributes to steadily raise the price of the land; so that the landlord pockets the best of what co-operation and municipal enterprise permit the worker, to economise. ‘Buy land in Woolwich,’ the land-agents advertise on their posters. ‘Splendid opportunities for building workingmen’s cottages: a good Co-operative Society, cheap tramways and a free ferry, plenty of municipal Socialism, and strong trade unions to secure good wages!’ Co-operators, municipal Socialists and even fierce trade unionists – all are thus made to work for the landlord: he grows richer every day.

And then come in the sharks. Thus, a certain home-made Pierpont Morgan, who only just begins to fatten, learns that there are schemes afloat of municipal and co-operative house-building at Woolwich. Without loss of time he buys just the land which both the town and the co-operators will want tomorrow, and now he will not sell for a thousand pounds the acre for which he yesterday paid three hundred pounds.

In short, every lamp-post planted by a municipality, every foot of municipal tramway, every free library, every garden- ing school and every co-operative shop raise the value of the

land. The price rises so rapidly that very soon all schemes of municipal enterprise will have to be given up – unless the British workers tell the landlords that they have enough of these drones and take back from them their own land – the land of the British nation.

After all – we need not grumble. Will it not be a nice bit of useful work to begin the Social Revolution this way? Especially if the claim against the landlords and the like be supported by a general strike, such as these foreign fools propose to us to do one of those days?

This is probably why the ruling middle classes, seeing whereto we are going, begin to think that it is high time to stop all that ‘municipal enterprise’. It is self-evident that they will not let themselves be expropriated without opposing resistance. They may favour municipal enterprise for a time; but the moment they see that it really begins to reduce the number of paupers in the towns or gives them regular employment, and consequently threatens to reduce the profits of the exploiters, they will soon put an end to it. The recent campaign undertaken by *The Times* against municipal Socialism, in the interest of various electrical Anglo-American companies, shows what the middle classes are capable of doing the moment they see that the so-called municipal Socialism is a real danger to their pockets, and menaces the profits they now get from the unpaid labour of the poor.

So far as object-lessons go, we are certainly in full sympathy with all that is being done to widen the attributes of city life and to introduce communistic conceptions into it. But it is only through a Social Revolution, made by the workers themselves, that the present exploitation of Labour by Capital can be altered. The revolution will have to be made in every city for itself, either on its own initiative, or to follow the initiative of other nations or Communes, but always by its own inhabitants; and, in making the revolution, the first preoccupation must be