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Some Notes on Anarchism and The Proletarian Myth

Sidney E. Parker

1973

”The question of Anarchism is not the concern of a single class, consequently also not of the laboring class, but it is the concern of every individual who values his personal liberty.”

John Henry Mackay

”The Masters have never lacked for a kind, sweaty force to bring back the Fugitives. They do not lack today. Call them what you will, common men, masses, proletarians, they are always the first in the sights of other conforming guns.”

Paul Herr

For many years anarchism has been associated by the press and historians with a species of anti-political state socialism based on the messianic role of the ”people” or the ”workers”. They have been supported in this view by many so-called anarchists who are actually collectivists who dislike centralization. Despite the modifications forced by reality upon the most intransigent populists, the illusion still persists as illusions usually do.

The first part of this essay is devoted to a criticism of this illusion. Why do the ”masses” remain unresponsive to the ”anarchist”

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message? Could it be that it only appeals to a minority? And if so, would it not be better to adjust one's sights accordingly?

One important element of the populist myth is the idea that during historical revolutions the "people" rise as a whole and topple their masters. They are supposed to be instinctively on the side of "freedom". The assumption is that because the worker is exploited, because he is subjected to the will of his bosses, he must therefore by virtue of his situation desire to be "free" and therefore be more responsive to Anarchist ideas than members of other classes.

In support of this assumption the proletarian mythicists assiduously collect scraps of information about the "direct action of the masses". They tell us of the black flag waving over factories during the Korean War, they go into raptures 'about the Berlin Uprising of 1953, the Hungarian Revolt of 1956, they enthuse about the first days of Castro's regime in Cuba and the May Days in Paris in 1968- not to mention the Paris Commune and the Mexican, Russian and Spanish revolutions. What they do not detail are the far more numerous and persistent examples of those proletarians who support the rulers who milk them~ who provide the bulk of the personnel of the prisons, police and military services, who are "always the first in the sights of other conforming guns", and who persecute the outstanding individual and clamor for conformity.

One of the most onerous burdens anarchists have to carry is this association with the dreary cult of "the workers", of those "ordinary down-to-earth" millions who have willingly been the fodder of their pastors and masters throughout the ages. The proletarian mythicists can go as far back as they wish into the past to find cases of "direct action" and "creativity" on the part of "the people". What they cannot do is show how these have ever supplanted authoritarian systems, or that they have not carried within them the seeds of new forms of authority. Indeed, the overwhelming historical evidence supports Eric Hoffer's contention in *The True Believer* that usually the masses have got what they wanted from "successful" revolutions - a stronger master - and that it was only their intel-

Until they can cut this umbilical cord that binds them to socialism they will never be able to come into their full power as self-owning individuals. They will still be lured along the never-never path that is supposed to lead to the lemonade springs and Cigarette trees of the Big Rock Candy Mountain.

4.

Whatever my hopes may be, however repugnant I find the miseries and hierarchies I encounter, I know that rulers cannot exist without the collaboration of the ruled and that it is ridiculous to suppose that archies are the products of government alone. Without the servility of the many, the power-privileged few would lose their authority. Since I do not depend on the future realization of some ideal society as my *raison d'elre*, I have no need to look to any class or group to validate my ideas.

But the rejection of socio-political myths is not synonymous with the rejection of all action by the individual. If the masses are indifferent or hostile, if the future promises to be a menacing blend of 1984 and Brave New World, nonetheless the imperfections of men and women will, until the final robotization, still leave gaps and fissures in the social fabric. In such interstices of the organized collective it will still be possible, here and there, to create sympathetic milieu, oases of asylum and resistance, for those who have both disaffiliated themselves from the values and mores of the Establishment and at the same time lost faith in both collectivist and authoritarian solutions to their problems. Such a way of going on, however, is not a product of the "class struggle". It is first and foremost an individualist effort: the creation of an egoistic sensibility.

lectual precursors who were disappointed (when they were decimated). And it also supports the gloomy conclusions of Simone Weil! in her syndicalist days:

"Can the workers organizations give the proletariat the strength it lacks? The very complexity of the capitalist system, and consequently the questions that the struggle to be waged against raises, carries into the very heart of the working class movement the degrading division of labor into manual and intellectual labor. Spontaneous struggle has always proved itself ineffective, and organized action almost automatically secretes an administrative apparatus, which, sooner or later, becomes oppressive."

2.

Would I deny that the class struggle exists, then? I do not. But there is considerable confusion between the fact of the class struggle and the theory of the class struggle.

The fact is the undeniable existence of a conflict of interests between employers and employees-whether State or "private". The awareness and extent of this conflict are not so widespread as the "class war" preachers would like themselves and others to believe, but it does exist and has at times resulted in improved conditions for the employees. It is as natural for a wage-earner to defend his interest as it is for a wage-payer to defend his. This is the fact of the matter and only a fool would deny it.

The theory, on the other hand, is based on the unverifiable belief that this conflict of interests will or can eventually lead to the abolition of exploitation and the establishment of a classless society. Whether the rationale is the Marxist view of a historical dialectic impelling the class struggle to the final resolution of all conflict in communism, or the Bakunist/Kropotkinist faith in the spontaneous revolutionary "creativity of the masses", makes little difference to the basic notion that the class struggle is the royal road to utopia. However modified by qualifications, or overlaid by "scientific" jargon, the theory remains a secularized version of the messianic belief in the coming of the "kingdom of heaven" on earth-and has

about as much evidence in its favor. For over 150 years the proletarian idealists have been exhorting the "workers" to be this or that, to do this or that, and their response has been virtually nil—unless the call has been to war. After more years than any of us alive can remember, the response of the vast majority of workers to anarchist ideas has been either indifference or hostility.

No revolt of the proletariat, or their predecessors in revolutionary mythology, has ever ended their servility. Their alleged "creativity" and "desire for freedom", as a class, is so much populist moonshine and is mostly the product of guilt-ridden upper and middle class intellectuals who want to expiate their social sins. Kropotkin, who is a typical example, repeats over and over again that "Anarchism is the "creation" of the masses", but never explains the causal connection between the two. All he does is give some selected historical incidents which he interprets as being such, and these are usually democratic rather than anarchist in character.

3.

The trouble with much of what is today called "anarchism" is the fact that its exponents are dominated by "socialized mentalities". By this I mean an obsession with the notion that the liberation of the individual is by way of integration with "society". Not, in this case, existing society, but an ideal, classless/stateless society that the indefinite future is supposed to bring.

The distinguishing feature of this type of socialized mentality is its possession by the belief that anarchism equals anti-statism. Once the State has been eliminated, as the argument runs, mankind will dwell in freedom. Unfortunately, this is not the case, because authority has other sources than the State. One of these is "society". Indeed, social customs and mores, because they are not specified in legal enactments, can be more persistently oppressive than the laws of the State against which, at times, there is some measure of juridical defense. Many professed anarchists recognize the oppressiveness of the State, but are blind to that of society. Their "anar-

chy", therefore, consists of replacing the vertical authority of the State with the horizontal authority of Society.

As an anarchist-individualist I acknowledge neither the legitimacy of State control over me, nor that of an acephalous mob labeling itself "anarchist". I am in agreement with Renzo Novatore when he wrote:

"Anarchy is not a social form, but a method of individuation. No society will concede to me more than a limited freedom and a well-being that it grants to each of its members. But I am not content with this and want more. I want all that I have the power to conquer. Every society seeks to confine me to the august limits of the permitted and the prohibited. But I do not acknowledge these limits, for nothing is forbidden and all is permitted to those that have the force and the valor.

Consequently, anarchy is not the construction of a new and suffocating society. It is a decisive fight, against all societies—Christian, democratic, socialist, communist, etc., etc. Anarchism is the eternal struggle of a small minority of aristocratic outsiders against all the societies that follow one another on the stage of history."

Like it or not, Anarchist ideas have never been more than the property of a small number of individuals who made Anarchism their interest and pushed it as such. The investment of the exploited mass with revolutionary virtue, the haranguing of them in minute-circulation papers that they never read, is often merely an elaborate disguise for a moralism which lays down how they ought to behave, and throws a multi-colored cloak over how they have behaved, do behave, and will behave - save, of course, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, Karl Marx and Michael Bakunin, separately or together...

Those who consider that Anarchism is organically linked with the class struggle are really in a half-way position between Anarchism and socialism. On the one hand they try to champion the ego-sovereignty that is the essence of Anarchism. On the other they remain captives of the democratic-collectivist-proletarian myths.