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Voline
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Synthesis (Anarchist)

Voline

We designate by the term “anarchist synthesis” a tendency existing presently in the heart of the libertarian movement, seeking to reconcile and then to “synthesize” the different currents of ideas that divide this movement into several fractions, more or less hostile to one another. It is a question, at base, of unifying, to a certain degree, anarchist theory and also the anarchist movement in a harmonious, organized, finished whole. I say “to a certain degree,” since, naturally, the anarchist idea could never, should never become rigid, immutable, stagnant. It must remain flexible, living, rich in varied ideas and tendencies. But flexibility must not signify confusion. And, on the other hand, between immobility and free floating there exists an intermediary state. It is precisely that intermediary state that the “anarchist synthesis” seeks to specify, settle and attain.

It was especially in Russia, during the revolution of 1917, that the necessity of such a unification, such a “synthesis,” made itself felt. Already very materially weak (few militants, no good means of propaganda, etc.) in comparison to other political and social currents, anarchism saw itself weaken still more, during the Russian Revolution, through some internal disputes that tore it apart. The

anarcho-syndicalists did not want to get along with the anarchist-communists and, at the same time, both quarreled with the individualists (not to mention other tendencies). That state of things made a painful impression on several comrades of various tendencies. Persecuted and finally chased from Great Russia by the Bolshevik government, some of these comrades went to campaign in Ukraine where the political atmosphere was more favorable, and where, at first with some Ukrainian comrades, they decided to create a unified anarchist movement, recruiting serious and active militants where they found them, without distinction of tendencies. The movement rapidly acquired an exceptional breadth and vigor. In order to gain a foothold and establish itself once and for all, it lacked only one thing: a positive theoretical basis.

Knowing me to be a resolute enemy of the harmful quarrels among the various currents of anarchism, and believe that I felt, like them, the necessity of reconciling them, some comrades came to seek me in a little town in central Russia where I was staying, and proposed that I depart from Ukraine, to take part in the creation of a unified movement, to furnish it with a theoretical basis and develop the thesis in the libertarian press.

I accepted the proposition. In November 1918, the unified anarchist movement in Ukraine was finally underway. Several groups would form and send their delegates to the first constitutive conference, which created the “Nabat Anarchist Confederation of the Ukraine.” That conference drafted and unanimously adopted a Declaration proclaiming the fundamental principles of the new body. It was decided that in the very near future that brief declaration of principles would be amplified, completed and commented upon in the libertarian press. The stormy events prevented that theoretical work. The Nabat confederation was bound to lead to uninterrupted and bitter struggles. Soon it was, in its turn, “liquidated” by the Bolshevik authorities that were installed in Ukraine. Apart from some newspaper articles, the Declaration of the first conference of Nabat

To end, let us emphasize once more that we do not at all renounce the diversity of ideas and currents within anarchism. But there is diversity and diversity. That, notably, which exists in our ranks today is an evil, a form of chaos. We would consider its maintenance as a very serious fault. We are of the opinion that the variety of our ideas could be and will be a progressive and fecund element only in the heart of a common movement, of a unified body, constructed on the basis of certain general theses accepted by all the members and on the aspiration to a synthesis.

It is only in the atmosphere of a common urge, it is only under the condition of the search for accurate theses and their acceptance, that our aspirations, our discussions and even our disputes would have value, will be useful and productive. (It was precisely thus in Nabat.) As for the disputes and polemics between little schools of thought, each preaching “its” unique truth, they can only lead to the continuation of the present chaos, to interminable internal quarrels and the stagnation of the movement.

We must discuss when striving to find the fecund unity, and not to impose at any cost “our” truth over that of another. It is only discussion of the first sort that leads to truth. As for the other discussion, it only leads to hostility, to vain quarrels and collapse.

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was and remains the sole exposé of the unifying (or “synthesizing”) tendency in the Russian anarchist movement.

The three dominant ideas that must, according to the Declaration, be accepted by all serious anarchists in order to unify the movement, are the following:

1) Definitive acceptance of the syndicalist principle, which indicates the true method of social revolution;

2) Definitive acceptance of the (libertarian) communist principle, which establishes the organizational basis of the new society that is forming;

3) Definitive acceptance of the individualist principle, the total emancipation and the happiness of the individual being the true aim of the social revolution and the new society.

While expanding on these ideas the Declaration tried to clearly define the notion of the “social revolution” and to destroy the tendency of certain libertarians seeking to adapt anarchism to the so-called “transitional period.”

That said, we would prefer, instead of again taking up the arguments of the Declaration, to develop the theoretical arguments for the synthesis ourselves.

The first question to resolve is this:

Is the existence of various hostile anarchist currents, arguing among themselves, a positive or negative fact? Does the separation of the libertarian idea and movement into several tendencies opposing one another, does it foster or, on the contrary, does it hinder the success of the anarchist conception? If it is recognized as favorable, all discussion is useless. If, on the contrary, it is considered harmful, we must draw from that admission all the necessary conclusions.

To this first question, we respond here:

In the beginning, when the anarchist idea was still little developed, confused, it was natural and useful to analyze it from all sides, to break it down and examine each of its elements in depth, to compare them, to contrast them with one another, etc. That is what has

been done. Anarchism was broken down into several elements (or currents.) Thus the whole, too general and vague, was dissected, which helped to deal in depth, to study thoroughly that whole as well as those elements. In that period, then, the dismemberment of the anarchist idea was a positive thing. Various people concerning themselves with the various currents of anarchism, both the details and the whole gained in depth and precision. But afterwards, once that first work was accomplished, after the elements of anarchist thought (communism, individualism, syndicalism) were turned over and over in every way, it was necessary to think of recreate, with these well worked elements, the organic whole from which they came. After a fundamental analysis, it was necessary to return (deliberately) to the beneficial synthesis.

A bizarre fact: we no longer think of that necessity. The people interested in a given element of anarchism end up substituting it for the whole. Naturally, they soon find themselves in disagreement and soon in conflict with those who treat other bits of the entire truth in the same manner. So, instead of reaching the idea of merging the scattered elements (which, taken separately, were no longer good for much of anything) into an organic whole, the anarchists undertook for long years the fruitless task of hatefully opposing their “currents” to one another. Each considered their “current,” their fragment as the only truth and fought bitterly with the partisans of the other currents. Thus commenced, in the libertarian ranks, that milling in place, characterized by blindness and mutual animosity, which continues into the present and which must be considered harmful to the normal development of the anarchist idea.

Our conclusion is clear. The carving up of the anarchist idea into several currents has fulfilled its role. It no longer has any utility. Nothing can justify it any longer. Now, it leads the movement into an impasse, causes it enormous harm and no longer offers it—nor can offer it—anything positive. The first period—when anarchism

must be considered false, not coinciding with the truth of life and needing to be rejected; and, on the other hand, everything that must be noted as being accurate, significant, accepted. It is necessary, then, to combine all the accurate and valuable elements, creating with them a synthetic whole. (It is especially in this first preparatory work that the reconciliation of the anarchists of various tendencies and their mutual tolerance could have great importance as a first decisive step.) And, finally, that ensemble must be accepted by all the serious and militants of anarchism as the basis of the formation of a stable libertarian body, whose members will thus be in agreement on an ensemble of fundamental these accepted by all.

We have already cited the concrete example of such a body: the Nabat confederation, in Ukraine. Let us add here to what we have already said above, that the acceptance by all the members of Nabat of certain common theses did not prevent the comrades of various tendencies from leaning especially, in their activity and propaganda, on the ideas that were dear to them. Thus, some (the syndicalists) occupied themselves above all with the problems concerning method and the organization of the revolution; others (communists) preferred to concern themselves with the economic basis of the new society; the third group (individualists) specifically emphasized the needs, real value and aspirations of the individual. But the mandatory condition, in order to be accepted in Nabat, was the acceptance of all three elements as indispensable parts of the whole and the renunciation of the state of hostility between the various tendencies. The militants were thus united in an “organic” manner, for the all accepted a certain collection of fundamental theses. It is in this way that we depict the concrete unification of the anarchists on the basis of a synthesis of libertarian ideas establish theoretically.

b) Simultaneously and in parallel with that theoretical work, an organization must be created, unified on the basis of anarchism synthetically understood.

some details, instead of preparing ourselves, with a common desire, for the future.

2) It is no less misplaced to reduce all the immensity of life, of the revolution, of the future creation, to some trivial little ideas and some petty disputes. Faced with the great tasks that await us, it is ridiculous, it is shameful to concern ourselves with these petty matters. The libertarians should unite on the basis of the anarchist synthesis. They must create an anarchist movement that is stable, whole, vigorous. As long as they have not created it, they will remain apart from life.

In what concrete forms could we foresee the reconciliation, the unification of the anarchists and then the creation of a unified libertarian movement?

We should emphasize, above all, that we do not imagine that unification as a “mechanical” assembly of the anarchists of various tendencies in a sort of multicolored camp where each would remain in their intransigent position. Such a unification would not be a synthesis, but a sort of chaos. Certainly, a simple, amicable rapprochement of the anarchists of various tendencies and a greater tolerance in their mutual relations (cessation of a violent polemic, collaboration in anarchist publications, participation in the same active organizations, etc.) would be a great step forward in relation to what occurs now in the libertarian ranks. But we consider this reconciliation and this tolerance as only the first step towards the creation of the true anarchist synthesis and of a unified libertarian movement. Our idea of the synthesis and unification goes much farther. It foresees something more fundamental, more “organic.”

We believe that the unification of the anarchists and of the libertarian movement should be pursued, simultaneously, in two ways, notably:

a) We must begin immediately a theoretical work seeking to reconcile, to combine, to synthesize our ideas, which appear, at first sight, heterogeneous. It is necessary to find and to formulate in the various currents of anarchism, on the one hand, everything that

sought itself, defined itself and inevitably divided itself at the task—has ended. It belongs to the past. It is high time to move on.

If the dispersion of anarchism is presently a negative, detrimental fact, we must seek to put an end to it. It is a question of remembering the entire ensemble, of sticking the scattered elements back together, of rediscovering and deliberately reconstructing the abandoned synthesis.

Then another question looms: is this synthesis actually, presently possible? Wouldn't it be a utopia? Could we furnish it a solid theoretical basis?

We respond: yes, a synthesis of anarchism (or, if you wish, a “synthetic” anarchism) is perfectly possible. There is nothing utopian about it. Rather strong reasons of the theoretical order speak in its favor. Let us briefly note some of these reasons, the most important, in their logical series:

1) If anarchism aspires to life, if it counts on a future triumph, if it seeks to become an organic and permanent element of life, one of its active, fertilizing, creative forces, then it must seek to situate itself as close as possible to life, to its essence, to its ultimate truth. Its ideological bases must agree as much as possible with the fundamental elements of life. It is clear, in fact, that if the primordial ideas of anarchism we found in contradiction with the true elements of life and evolution, anarchism could not be vital. Now, what is life? Could we, in some way, define and formulate its essence, grasp and settle its characteristic traits? Yes, we can do it. It is a question, certainly, not of a scientific formula of life—a formula that does not exist—but of a more or less clear and correct definition of its visible, palpable, conceivable essence. In this order of ideas, life is, above all, a great synthesis: and immense and complicated ensemble, an organic and original whole, of multiple and varied elements.

2) Life is a synthesis. So what is the essence and what is the originality of this synthesis? The crux of life is that the greatest variety of its elements—which, moreover, finds itself in a perpet-

ual movement—realizes, at the same time and as perpetually, a certain unity or, rather, a certain equilibrium. The essence of life, the essence of it sublime synthesis, is the constant tendency towards equilibrium, indeed the constant realization of a certain equilibrium, in the greatest diversity and in a perpetual movement. (Not that the idea of an equilibrium of certain elements as being the biophysical essence of life is confirmed by scientific physico-chemical experiments.)

3) Life is a synthesis. Life (the universe, nature) is an equilibrium (a sort of unity) in the diversity and in the movement (or, if you wish, a diversity and a movement in equilibrium). Consequently, if anarchism desires to march hand in hand with life, if it seeks to be one of its organic elements, if it aspires to agree with it and lead to a true result, instead of finding itself in opposition with it in order to be finally rejected, it must, also, without renouncing the diversity or movement, to realize also, and always, the equilibrium, the synthesis, the unity.

But it is not enough to affirm that anarchism can be synthetic: it must be synthetic. The synthesis of anarchism is not only possible, not only desirable: it is indispensable. While preserving the living diversity of its elements, while avoiding its stagnation, which accepting its movement—essential conditions of his vitality—anarchism must seek, at the same time, the equilibrium in that diversity and that movement itself.

Diversity and movement without equilibrium is chaos. Equilibrium without diversity or movement is stagnation, death. Diversity and movement in equilibrium, such is the synthesis of life. Anarchism must be varied, moving and, at the same time, balanced, synthetic, unchanging. In the opposite case, it would not be vital.

4) Let us note, finally, that the true heart of the diversity and movement of life (and therefore of the synthesis) is creation, the constant production of new elements, new combinations, new movements, of a new equilibrium. Life is a creative diversity. Life is an equilibrium in an uninterrupted creation. Consequently, no

anarchist could pretend that “their” current is the unique and constant truth, and that all the other tendencies in anarchism are absurdities. It is, on the contrary, absurd that an anarchist would let themselves enter into the impasse of a single little “truth,” their own, and thus forget the great, real truth of life: the perpetual creation of new forms, of new combinations, of a constantly renewed synthesis.

The synthesis of life is not stationary: it creates, it constantly modifies its elements and their mutual relations.

Anarchism seeks to participate, in the domains that are accessible to it, in the creative acts of life. Consequently, it must be, within the limits of its idea, broad, tolerant, synthetic, while finding itself in creative movement.

The anarchist must observe attentively, with perspicacity, all the serious elements of libertarian thought and of the libertarian movement. Far from diving into any single element, he must seek the equilibrium and synthesis of all the elements given. He must, moreover, constantly analyze and monitor his synthesis, by comparing it with the elements of life itself, in order to always be in perfect harmony with life. Indeed, life never rests in one place; it changes. And, consequently, the role and the mutual relations of the various element of the anarchist synthesis will not always remain the same: in various cases, it will sometimes be one, sometimes another of these elements that must be stressed, relied on, put into action.

A few words on the concrete realization of the synthesis.

1) We must never forget that the realization of the revolution, that the creation of the new forms of life will be incumbent not on us, anarchists isolated or grouped by ideology, but on the vast popular masses who will, alone, will be quite capable of accomplishing that immense destructive and creative task. Our role, in that realization, will be limited to that of a catalyst, of an element of cooperation, guidance and example. As for the forms in which that process will be completed, we can only glimpse them very approximately. It is so much more uncalled for of us to quarrel over