Why Attack Emma Goldman?

William C. Owen

1922

The man is starving, but he may not pluck so much as a turnip to save his life. The wind cuts to the marrow of his bones, but out in the open he must he if he cannot purchase shelter.

This is the lot of the modern proletariat reduced to destitution. It is the condition thousands of unemployed and penniless continually must face. This very day, in every " civilised" country, thousands will have gone without a meal. This very night thousands will shiver on park benches, or huddle themselves into a fitful sleep within some friendly doorway. A life no decent-minded man would wish his dog to lead.

Even here we do not touch bottom. Not only must the man starve to-day; he must go on starving. This night he is shelterless, and for weeks and months he may have no roof to cover him. He may not say, "I will go to work and raise for myself the food without which I cannot live." He may not lay hands on the materials scattered all around him and build the modest cabin that would satisfy his needs. This freedom to protect himself—a freedom every savage and every beast of the field enjoys—civilised Society denies him. If he wishes to prolong his existence he must hunt up a master and, somehow or other, get a job.

I put, bluntly and curtly, the position with which all the early revolutionists found themselves confronted as soon as they explored the social problem. They faced it unflinchingly. At its beginnings Socialism went straight to the root of this question and declared unhesitatingly: "The disinherited have been reduced to helplessness, and this helplessness must be abolished. They are divorced from the means of production, and that divorce must be ended. First, and before all else, they must regain possession of the opportunity of supporting themselves without a master."

Thus spake the early Socialists, and what they proclaimed was true and vital. They were not opportunists, ready to sacrifice mankind's whole future for some worthless gain in the immediate present. They were not politicians, eager to sell their movement for a spoonful of official porridge. They had no thought of obscuring the one great issue with the bewildering philosophies in which the learned gentry who make their living by writing books, and all that heterogeneous mob whose vocation is party-organising, have since enshrouded it. With these the rot set in, and the rotting has gone on and on for fifty years. How deep that rot had cut the War revealed, and Russia, with Lenin and his Dictatorship of the Proletariat, furnished the final and conclusive proof.

Not for one moment would any of the earlier Socialists have tolerated such a doctrine. Never was any one of them so debased as to pretend that salvation lay in putting all the means of production at the disposal of an autocratic State. They said distinctly: "This man, the proletarian,

must be rescued from helplessness and put in a position where he can call his life his own." They proclaimed boldly: "This man, individually, must own the means wherewith to make his living." They declared unfalteringly that their one aim was the abolition of human slavery, which had its root in monopoly of the tools of production and the machinery of distribution. As they spake, in the days of Socialism's purity, the Anarchists are speaking to-day.

It is never possible to lay a finger on the precise spot at which rot sets in, but unquestionably Marx and Engels figure prominently among the movement's wreckers. Their ambition to pose as scientists and saviours; their idle dream of the formation of a party which should sweep into office by the vote of the majority and land them and their adherents in the seats of power—these threw the door wide open to a thousand evasions and concealments; to endless opportunistic concessions and whittlings-away with hard and honest truth; to a most infamous bamboozling of the public for the sake of catching the much-coveted vote. Lenin has merely availed himself of the chaos created by the War and driven Socialism, as taught byMarx and Engels, to its inevitable and logical conclusion. He had the courage to take the fatal plunge. Sword in hand he took the short cut, and set this monstrous Stale lie in the very centre of the world's stage, where all could see its workings. An invaluable lesson to the world at large. One needed, as it appeared, oven by many who regarded themselves as Anarchists.

It is impossible to clean up a cesspool without raising a stench, and this mass of slowly gathering corruption, which finally crystallised in the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, will not die sweetly. No weapon will be too foul for it to employ, and we Anarchists, whose speciality is the exposure of this State lie, must expect to be the target of its most virulent attacks.

For my own part, I am very positive that it will join hands with capitalist Governments for our suppression, and I know well that calumny will be its favourite arm. I notice that Emma Goldman is already getting her dose of it, and, as a number of absurd and utterly irrelevant things are being said about our comrade, I wish to set down a single fact beyond dispute.

Emma Goldman is an Anarchist. I have heard her lecture scores of times, and the note she never tired of striking was that the Socialists were centralists, who believed in the State, whereas the Anarchists were decentralists, who utterly detested it. Always she insisted that State Socialism, if ever tried, would fail disastrously; and she considered the growing powers all Governments have been gathering into their hands the most serious menace that confronts the people. Now Emma Goldman has been to Russia, of which she was a native, and has found her previous conclusions verified by facts. She has related her experiences frankly, and I cannot imagine anything more natural. She has seen things as an Anarchist was sure to see them, and to me the one surprising fact is the discovery that certain people are apparently surprised.

Some of our own comrades do not like it that Emma Goldman's articles have appeared in the *New York World*, the Hearst papers, and doubtless in other capitalistic journals. My own viewpoint is different. In my opinion, the more powerful the megaphone you can employ the better, the thing that matters being not who owns the instrument, but the use to which the speaker puts it. Only by telling the truth openly and fearlessly, in the hearing of all men, can we hope to clear the way.

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