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Anarchism

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Max Nomad's observation that anarchism is a dying creed is largely correct. The chief landmarks of anarchist history are all a matter of the past, and even the last rally of libertarian forces to the field in the Spanish Civil War was witnessed by another, now lost, generation. It is impossible in the light of this to talk to-day of anarchism in a spirit of hopefulness about practical advances or in terms of large-scale aims; what we can say about it will have to be quite different from discussing the political aims of present-day left-wing movements. Events of the last hundred years, especially the story of forty years of successful socialist dictatorship in Russia, make this easy for us to see; but it is not less clear that a different view of anarchism, a view of it as something that will change the whole of society in favour of freedom, has always depended on certain errors. Those who criticise Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin and the rest for being utopian are usually not blind to these errors. As a matter of fact such criticism consists mainly of an exposure of the false optimism of nineteenth century anarchist theory.

It seems to me, nevertheless, that we cannot dispose of anarchism entirely by writing off its futuristic and utopian parts as worthless. There is a streak in anarchist thought

which contradicts the utopian elements: certain passages in anarchist writings emphasise present protest and present anti-authoritarianism, and play down the concern with the future and with prospects of achieving massive success. The fact that this sort of attitude (admittedly in a minor, confused and epigrammatic way) was already present in nineteenth century anarchist doctrines is generally ignored by contemporary libertarian sympathisers.

To the initiated as well as to the uninitiated, anarchism is still the search for “*Nowhere*”. But to say this is, in my opinion, a misapprehension which ignores certain tendencies in anarchism, and to correct such a one-sided view we have to be reminded that in addition to a considerable amount of naïve speculation anarchism also contains a realistic line of thought on the nature of society. In the course of making this point I want to argue that those who work out this realistic line consistently, by freeing it from its utopian associations, are entitled to claim a stronger connection with traditional anarchism than the mere use of the word “anarchist” as an appropriated label.

It has almost become an historians’ convention to regard the beginnings of modern anarchism as being connected with the activities of Michael Bakunin. I will follow this convention, not because of its correctness but because it saves time. Bakunin’s anarchism, which was a late development of his personal history, had numerous sources: chiefly the writings of Proudhon and the libertarian aspects of Marx’s work. The movement which he personally did much to arouse was similarly inspired and the early history of nineteenth century anarchism is mixed up with the early history of the socialist movement in general. It was not until after the entry of Bakunin and his followers into the First International in the 1860’s that a distinct anarchist position emerged from the contest, carried on largely within the International, between Bakuninists and Marxists.

The division between the two parties corresponded, roughly, to the division between the Latin and Germanic sectors of

the socialist movement. Leading issues between them illustrate some of the main anarchist points. State-socialists, as they were contemptuously called, and anarchists were agreed in their aim of bringing about freedom, by which they meant the removal of the oppression, the exploitation and the inequalities from the backs of the masses who suffered from them. The Marxist contention was that this can only be done by the “proletariat” capturing State power and establishing a dictatorship of its own. Such a view is the consequence of the Marxist theory that the state is a mere instrument, a tool of the ruling class for the maintenance of its position.

Bakunin is seen at his best in attacking this view. *“They say that this State yoke — the dictatorship — is a necessary transitional means in order to attain the emancipation of the people: Anarchism or freedom is the goal, the State or dictatorship is the means. Thus to free the working masses it is first necessary to enslave them.”* The State, so Bakunin argued, is not a mere instrument but an institution with its own rules of working. It is impossible to capture an institution and force it to go your own way, it has an influence which cannot be nullified by the policies of those working within it. Kropotkin, talking of “*sincere Republicans*” who want to utilise the organisation that already exists, made the same point: *“And for not having understood that you cannot make an historical institution go in any direction you would have it, that it must go its own way, they were swallowed up by the institution.”* As for this dictatorship being “representative” and “transitional”, Bakunin scornfully rejected this as totally unrealistic. *“Thus, from whatever angle we approach the problem, we arrive at the same sorry result: the rule of great masses of people by a small privileged minority. But, the Marxists say, this minority will consist of workers. Yes, indeed, of ex-workers, who, once they become rulers or representatives of the people, cease to be workers and begin to look down upon the toiling masses. From that time on they represent not the people but themselves and their own claims to govern the people. Those*

who doubt this know precious little about human nature.” State-socialism, to Bakunin, was “freedom” imposed on people and this he regarded as a nonsensical contradiction. The history of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia is a thorough verification of his views on Communism. He had foreseen the mutations of a revolution led by an elite, predicted in particular the change from the anti-State character of the revolution in its early spontaneous phase to the conservative, power-seeking nature of the established Soviet government.

As against the political revolution of the Marxists (which virtually amounts to the replacement of one set of rulers by another, together with a change in the slogans of the governing ideology) anarchists advocated a “social revolution” meaning a change from one form of social organisation to another. The difference between a social revolution as seen by anarchists, and any other revolution lies in this: that the social revolutionary objective is not the capturing but the destruction of the State-machinery and, consequently, the elimination of power relationships from society. This follows from the anarchist doctrine that the State signifies not merely the existence of power placed above the subjects but includes a whole set of relationships between members of society. The State on this view is a centralised institution which claims competence to interfere with independent sections of society; it lays down and enforces rules in a number of fields and in this way conducts affairs affecting people — nominally in their interests, in fact, as often as not, against their interests. The continual extension of the areas of State operation, already a feature of nineteenth century Europe, was seen by anarchists as a danger to freedom and consequently as something to be opposed.

Anarchists recognised that even groups which are interested in capturing power *for the sake of* bringing about freedom, notwithstanding the sincerity of the individuals concerned simply never get past the first objective. Therefore, the problem as it appeared to them, was always one of “how to achieve free-

and what nineteenth century anarchists had to say. I am thinking especially of their attacks on the State, on the Church and other authoritarian institutions; their criticisms of the security-craving ideals of the bourgeoisie and of the workers who caught it from them; of the domineering relationships which characterise economic life; of the authoritarian ideology of Marxism and of the compromising stand of reformists, etc. But where upholders of permanent protest would part from old-fashioned anarchists is over the contention that in all this there is something that will lead to a social revolution and a rosy, free state of future society. Freedom has always had a hard road to tread, as the biography of any anarchist will amply prove, and nothing that anarchists ever said has succeeded in making the idea of freedom flourishing in safety and security in any way less implausible than it is. But some of the things they have said indicate, as I have tried to show, that the contest between freedom and authority is the permanent order of the day. Doing politics, advancing freedom as a programme for the entire human race, cannot change this; it can only foster illusions about the way society runs.

dom” and never one of “how to capture power”. But the view they held about their prospects was an optimistic one, to say the least. Clearly, there can be no talk of “achieving freedom” until we have dealt with the question of whether social changes of the kind envisaged by the anarchists can be accomplished at all. Already Proudhon saw that there was a problem here for him. After rejecting the notion that governments can bring about social revolutions (governments are by nature conservative and interested in upholding the *status quo*) he fell back on “*society itself*” accomplishing the change. “*Society itself*” meant to Proudhon “*the masses when permeated by intelligence*”, and he said that the revolution will take place “*through the unanimous agreement of the citizens, through the experience of the workmen and through the progress and growth of enlightenment*”. Later anarchists had a not dissimilar solution to offer: “*Revolutionary collectivists*,” wrote Bakunin, “*try to diffuse science and knowledge among the people, so that the various groups of human society, when convinced by propaganda, may organise and combine into federations, in accordance with their natural tendencies and their real interests.*”

Kropotkin’s work was almost entirely devoted to proving that man is by nature co-operative and altruistic and that the non-co-operative, aggressive tendencies in people are the result of the authoritarian social environment in which they live. According to him, anarchist propaganda works on these latent co-operative tendencies and, by kindling them, brings about the social revolution. This simple-minded faith in “the natural genius of the people” has survived into our modern world. George Woodcock, a contemporary follower of Kropotkin, in criticising the “pessimism” of Burnham, has this to say: “*Where, however, Burnham and many others of his kind differ from Kropotkin and the anarchists is in their pessimistic acceptance of the inevitability of the triumph of the State in its extreme form. The determinism that dominates their idea is, indeed, hardly tenable on any grounds of logic or social experience. Nothing is in-*

evitable in society, either managerial revolution or social revolution. Only tendencies can be described, and the tendency towards the social revolution is just as much alive to-day, if less apparent, as that towards the final consummation of the State.” Woodcock argues that while the State has made enormous progress, the continued existence of society in its present form depends on the co-operation of the workers, and therefore the real power lies in their hands. *“The consolidation of the State and the social death that will follow thereon will never be completed if the workers once become aware of their power and kill the State by the paralysis of direct economic action.”*

Behind these theories about the coming of the social revolution lie certain assumptions about the working of society. In the case of Proudhon’s naïve statement it is easiest to see what is being assumed: a unanimous agreement among citizens, and the power of education or propaganda to change people’s beliefs and objectives. Such unanimous agreement is clearly impossible if people are in conflict on various demands, and, equally, the most powerful propaganda is doomed to failure where it goes against vested interests. This obvious truth about society was not completely ignored by anarchists. In criticising Fourier, Bakunin calls it an error to believe that peaceful persuasion and propaganda will *“touch the hearts of the rich to such an extent that the latter would come themselves and lay down the surpluses of their riches at the doors of their phalansteries.”* It seems then that even the theory of class struggle held by anarchists contradicted their solidarist beliefs. In this vein Peter Kropotkin talked about the two currents of history: *“Throughout the history of our civilisation, two traditions, two opposed tendencies, have been in conflict: the Roman tradition and the popular tradition, the imperial tradition and the federalist tradition, the authoritarian tradition and the libertarian tradition”.* So that even anarchists had to admit that solidarity of entire societies is a fiction. However, apart from the rulers who would not be interested in freedom, there is the large mass

“to think of the future is criminal”. Malatesta, on occasions, also emphasised the anarchist concern with opposing presently existing, established authorities: *“How will society be organised? We do not know and we cannot know. No doubt, we too have busied ourselves with projects of social reorganisation, but we attach to them only a very relative importance. They are bound to be wrong perhaps entirely fantastic.”*

It appears that not all anarchist thought was cast in a utopian mould. The statements quoted indicate, I think, an advance in realism. Along this line we can take freedom as a character, not of societies as a whole but of certain groups, institutions and people’s ways of life within any society, and even then not as their exclusive character. Equally, on this view, piecemeal freedoms will always meet with opposition and those who are caught up in them will resist conformist pressures. The *“permanent protest”* implied by this is carried on without the promise of final triumph but in a spirit of *“distrusting your masters and distrusting your emancipators”*, and with no intention of wanting to make the world safe for freedom. This security seeking ideal, or some variant of it, is the aim of the modern socialist movement, but it involves it in trying to capture power for the sake of enforcing its demands on the rest of society, thereby leading to the very authoritarianism that revolutionaries have ostensibly denounced. As against this way of proceeding non-utopian anarchism has to be described as futile. The futility consists not in being a failure at revolutionary politics but in refusing to deal in terms of success or failure; in not attempting to carry out, or even propose, wide, all-embracing policies that bear on the whole of society and are meant to further *the* final revolution. Only in this way can one hope to avoid that illusory optimism which claims as its victims all those who try to engage mass support of workers, or who try to persuade quantities of people whose interest in anarchy is negligible.

There is considerable agreement between a position of permanent protest (such as the one formulated by Max Nomad)

erate to the exclusion of all opposition. The point, expressed differently, amounts to this: Bakunin's claim that history is on the side of anarchism implies that some day some social changes will take place that will have as their effect the elimination of social struggle. This possibility is highly metaphysical and we can safely ignore — both in Marx and Bakunin — the notions of inevitability which they had learnt from Hegel. History is not on the side of the working class, nor is it on the side of the State, Prussian or Oceanian. The analogy with "1984" is apposite even though in its *content* the anarchist Utopia is the exact reverse of Orwell's "*world of victory after victory, triumph after triumph: an endless pressing, pressing, pressing upon the nerve of power*". But it resembles the latter very closely in treating a mythical striving for one-sided success as a possible historical development.

The ambivalence of anarchists comes out, among other instances, in the fact that they did not adhere rigidly to their conception of the State-society as completely unfree, and the Stateless society as entirely free. As in the case of its complement, the unitary view of society, there are gaps in this theory forced by the recognition of facts. Kropotkin's two currents of history is expressed in this way: "*Between these two currents, always alive, struggling in humanity — the current of the people and the current of the minorities which thirst for political and religious domination — our choice is made*". Here is a passage illuminated by a different conception of freedom, as something which is always alive and struggling within society against authoritarian tendencies which are every bit as genuine as what is opposed to them. Anarchism, in this untypical excerpt, is a support of freedom which is one thing alone with other causes that can be supported or opposed. The coming or not coming of the social revolution recedes in importance, since freedom and authority are always struggling, and the chief issue becomes one of immediate opposition to the State. Contradicting a great deal of his utopianism Bakunin himself, echoing Marx, once said that

of oppressed, the workers, to whom anarchist theory was supposed to apply. But the working class itself displays no solidarity in support of any one cause, and anarchists, to uphold the view that a revolution from below is possible, had to fall back on the quite implausible theory of "real interests" — of underlying, non-apparent solidarity. Thus when Bakunin came to criticise the German socialists he explained the fact that German workers in general have no anarchist leanings by blaming Lassalle and Marx for misleading the German proletariat. This argument is very unconvincing. By the same reasoning it could be made out that Italian or Spanish anarchists were, underneath, "really" Marxists misled by Bakunin's glibness.

Equally unsuccessful are Kropotkin's efforts to show that the co-operative tendencies in workers, or any other tendencies held to be favourable to the spread of anarchy, are more real or more fundamental than those admittedly existing trends which are unfree, or which make for conflict. We could here object to the "psychologising" of social phenomena implied by the talk about tendencies in individuals favoured by Kropotkin. But a more important point about the view that the workers have a "natural tendency" to anarchism or that it is in their "real interests" is that we cannot empirically distinguish natural tendencies from others we could call unnatural. Woodcock's argument is open to the same objection: the tendency towards the social revolution is not apparent because it consists of something the workers are supposed to have but do not in fact have — an interest in the general strike. In a realistic moment Bakunin himself admitted this on talking in detail about the working class. He found that there is a labour aristocracy of more developed, literate individuals, as well as an unconscious mass of workers. He found that artisans such as, for instance, blacksmiths show signs of revolutionary instincts while others, mainly better paid craftsmen, have distinctly bourgeois ambitions and outlook. Among joiners, printers, tailors, he found, as a consequence of the degree of education and special knowl-

edge required for these trades, more conscious thinking but also more bourgeois smugness; while, to instance a final example, he noted that those who are thoroughly imbued with a revolutionary spirit are in a minority and comprise what he called a “*revolutionary vanguard*”. Observations of this kind, noting the variety of ways and directions in which workers are motivated, contrast sharply with the talk about workers’ solidarity favoured by socialists of every kind.

Connected with this solidarist view, which sometimes goes so far as to lead to a description of the free society as one from which all disagreements have vanished, is the view that freedom is something which affects society as a whole. Bakunin takes the line that equality and socialism are necessary conditions of freedom. “*The serious realisation of liberty will be impossible so long as the vast majority of the population remains dispossessed in points of elementary need.*” Accordingly, freedom means “freedom-for-all”, and this is all that it means. The question raised by this way of talking is again whether the “*serious realisation of liberty*” is at all possible, whether freedom is something of which we can sensibly ask: is it realisable? It seems that if Bakunin was right we could not explain how the idea of freedom arose at all unless we postulate an original fully socialistic and egalitarian society, a sort of “condition of grace” from which subsequent human societies have fallen. Nor could we understand how the State encroaches on freedom unless we took the most illogical step of regarding it as standing *vis-à-vis* an already existing free society, attacking it from the outside. It is on this view hard to grasp how anarchists came to support freedom in the first place, and, in fact, we do find them sometimes talking in a way which denies that the attempts to dominate and rule over people arise out of genuine demands for power. When in this mood, anarchists ask us to regard the State as a “distortion”, as a “horrible fiction” somehow not of the human world. But anarchists, of all people, cannot deny the unfictitious, matter of fact existence of authority and

we find that it was in drawing attention to it that they have over-reached themselves and have put forward a doctrine on which freedom (except in the nebulous future) is impossible. As a consequence of this false theory of freedom anarchists were utopian in their political pronouncements. On their totalistic view of freedom as a state of society yet to come they could not accommodate in their thought those piecemeal activities and social forces struggling against authority which, in practice, they clearly recognised. Liberty is something not found at present, something that will “really” come only in the future: hence the utopian concern with the future of society.

There is a marked internal contradiction in anarchism between the utopian social reformer’s outlook and the clear-cut attack on authority which does not invoke the common good. Evidence of this is that no matter how pronounced their escapist preoccupations were anarchist thinkers never freed themselves from ambivalence when talking about the future. They recognised that “*to indoctrinate and dictate to the future*” is a form of authoritarianism, the more so since the social role of the picture of a happy future, in religion no less than in politics, is to cloak present demands which would not be as readily acceptable without the reference to the rewards of “kingdom come”. One gains the impression that anarchists vaguely suspected the true function of utopian thought. In the case of their critique of socialism this is evident: they demonstrated that the socialist Utopia, the use of repressive institutions for the ending of repression, disguises an immediate demand for the leadership of the proletariat as a means of gaining power. Anarchists readily pointed out that it is a mistake to think that this sort of thing will lead to freedom. In spite of this, they commit a similar mistake in suggesting the final triumph of forces struggling for freedom. Bakunin’s dictum “*Liberty is the goal of the historic progress of humanity*” fairly obviously involves the erroneous belief that there are special interests in politics — such as the interest in freedom or in gaining power — which can op-