

After Six Years of Authoritarian Revolution

Max Nettlau

1923–24

Contents

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	7

Chapter 1

Six years after the immense upheaval in Russia, five years after so many so-called revolutionary attempts and situations in a large part of central Europe, one would have expected a little more from the socialist current, in the way of revolutionary impetus, of solidarity, of enthusiasm, or at least some real human feeling, in those countries and in all the other parts of the world, in those countries where socialist ideas, movements and organization have become so widespread and attained so much variety after so many years, for socialism is no longer young. Is it now too old, did it grow old too fast, will it die before it can really flower? These questions might not be too pessimistic: there was a regrettable turning point of the emancipatory current that overwhelmed it during its youthful period and it sought to proceed directly to the creation of a new world. But seduced by the miracle of immediate success, the reformist and authoritarian tendency long ago abandoned the struggle for a free society and expelled the idea of freedom from its concepts, thus condemning itself to sterility, incoherence and premature senility, and at the same time, by dividing the revolutionary current into two forces that were never capable of establishing real solidarity between each other, it has held back the progress of the entire social movement, causing socialist aspirations to be defeated in their first worldwide campaign. It is of no use to conceal the degree to which the defection of the majority of contemporary socialists is also the downfall of our own hopes as libertarian socialists.

Thus the unfolding events — from the moment when international socialism had the opportunity to mount a large scale reaction against the war and failed to do so in 1914; after it was confronted by the social and political revolutions in Russia in March and November of 1917; after the collapse of the empires in central Europe in 1918 and 1919 right up to the present — have proven the inefficacy, the impotence, the absolute unanimity of political and reformist socialism, therefore of social democracy and the workers parties, along with their tail of moderate, centralized trade unions; they have also proven that the revolutionary surface appearance of the authoritarian socialists, those who do not consent to haggle with the bourgeoisie for a few crumbs of fictitious power the way the domesticated social democrats do in their cage, but who proclaim that they want all the power for themselves and sometimes succeed in getting it, only to become, as a result of this victory — won with the support of all the socialists — usurping monopolists, tyrants who hate, mistreat and crush everything they can, all other socialist ideas, and naturally do not understand how to accomplish this except by establishing a purely military and police victory (and thus a temporary one), artificially prolonged by means of expedients but which is really nothing but a scarecrow that is used by reaction to discredit socialism as a whole in the eyes of the great mass of

uninstructed and misinformed persons. Objectively, one cannot hold in very high esteem the opinions of this mass of persons too easily influenced by prejudices and appearances, but their silent sympathies and animosities, however ambiguous and unreasonable they might be, always exercise an immediate influence by creating an atmosphere, an ambiance, in which one idea, inflated by the wind of some kind of popularity, makes rapid progress, while another idea, regardless of its value, appears to be hamstrung by generalized indifference.

This experience of the inefficacy of the social democrats and the authoritarian communists has redounded to the benefit of European revolutionary syndicalism, in which the revolutionary tendencies, in a previous era, and especially with regard to theory, were once so strong, but have since been powerless against so many other currents and personal and so-called practical influences. The pure anarchosyndicalist tendency has been left on the sidelines by these developments and this must not continue, and all of us undoubtedly support it in its present efforts.

The European anarchists have not, solely on their own initiative, been capable of inspiring events with an impulse that corresponds with their ideas and have lost much of their influence, whether due to a solidarity that is more sentimental than in tune with the movements in which their spirit has no real chance of prevailing, or due to a tendency to engage in polemics with the most fanatical of their opponents, who are the hardest to convince. As a result, they have all suffered due to the faults of some and the notion that the failure of the authoritarians will increase the drawing power of libertarian ideas is, unfortunately, a new illusion; the depression and illness of the social body affects and weakens socialism as a whole, because it is impossible, it seems, that upon a terrain that is for one reason or another unsuitable, one kind of socialism should stagnate while another thrives in its place; misfortune creates, to the contrary, a common fate of downfall for both.

The last few years have undoubtedly contributed something new, or rather have demonstrated certain tendencies suffused with vitality that have come to assume a foreground position. Thus, despite the social democracy, the critique of parliamentarism has made an impression on the masses, and the idea of direct action has influenced them, too, and in these tendencies the ideas of the soviet, rank and file assemblies and the workers councils have also arisen, all efforts to replace the system and to ensure that the individual does not just hand himself over in handcuffs to the discretion of his elected representatives — efforts that testify to critical acumen and good will, but which must ultimately return to parliamentarism, which is not destroyed in principle, and which is a reality rather than just an intensification or an amplification of detail, and therefore these tendencies indicate an effort to shorten the authoritarian chain and are thus a very false way to liberation. A similar process has taken place in syndicalism; besides the far-off syndicalism of the future there is the close cohesion of all the employees — often from differ-

ent trades and unions — of a factory, a more effective and direct force than the trade union, whether for the purposes of paralyzing production during the course of struggle, or so that the workers themselves, in cooperation with the technical staff, can restart production again and eliminate the parasite who pockets the profits. This idea, which has spread to every country and has been put into practice as far as the temporary expropriation, the occupation of the metal factories and their seizure in Italy, in 1920, has been a great advance for us, and they have discovered, so to speak, the mechanism of future production; it will be much simpler than is currently believed — the immediate non-recognition of the alleged rights of the parasites who contribute nothing to the technical efficiency of production. Here and there, there have also been some expropriations of the land, whose importance for the food supply is more fully appreciated now than it was in the world of agricultural abundance before the war, when worldwide competition made the land and the peasants of Europe seem like useless accessories and extras that no one knew what to do with. Now, in Europe at least, which has suffered acute food shortages, the dislocation of agriculture and industry, created by the system that perfected the industrial system, has been attenuated, and both are now understood to be more closely connected again and the “industrial village”, intensive agriculture, and many of the ideals of Kropotkin and Morris, have become the hope and the dream of people who feel instinctively driven towards a return to the land, without any knowledge whatsoever of the libertarian aspirations that have always been directed towards this goal. On this terrain our own ideas have been brought closer to the vague aspirations of many people who are disoriented and disillusioned by out-of-control industrialism and who are looking for a better way, a way of life in which they cease to be insignificant cogs in the machinery of the industrial Moloch in order to become instead complete men with their own arms and brains in the workshop and on the land.

Two other tendencies typical of our era are still capable of leading to some good results. One feels today, a little bit everywhere, that large parts of the old system are collapsing, that no one knows what will come of this, but nothing would surprise us, we feel that changes are coming and we will accept them soon, although more with a sense of resignation than of enthusiasm. Radical changes will therefore encounter less resistance than one would have thought previously, which is not to suggest, however, that these changes will encounter a world that is capable of and desirous of realizing them; this world will only endure them just like it has endured so many other things during the last ten years. Resistance will therefore be reduced, but there will still be a lack of real interest, if I judge correctly. Further proof is offered by the fact that, although a great deal of suffering has been imposed on the working people, their needs have grown during this period; they demand food and better housing and less work, and they do not work as hard as

they did before the war; like the peasant, the worker now has a sense of the value of his labor and will not return to absolute frugality, and to work that is destructive of his health and harmful to his intellectual development, as he did so many other times. This fact has disturbed the equilibrium of capitalist production, which had based its calculations on the existence of masses of workers driven by poverty to sell themselves at the lowest price and work themselves to death. Such masses no longer exist in the countries of Europe, where the irreparable crisis of the war struck; even the unemployed prefer to go hungry rather than to lend a hand to the reconstruction of the servile labor of the prewar era.

But if these changes in popular action and mentality give us grounds for hope, we must not lose sight of the terrible absence of the spirit and desire for freedom in the masses — whether they are socialists, or supporters of the popular parties more generally — their readiness to adopt any authoritarian leadership whatsoever, to express themselves through any kind of authority as long as it is always an alleged expression of equality and, woefully enough, even without equality, for one will always find that out of every crowd ninety-nine out of a hundred of them are prepared, indeed, they are delighted, to work on behalf of authority, whether as officials, representatives of whatever stripe, army or police; this is most pleasing to them, to exercise authority themselves and not to have to take responsibility, to be backed up by the authority of their superiors. We have also seen how bureaucratism, far from having collapsed along with the old political regimes, is attempting to make a comeback through these changes, swarming and denouncing in a hotbed of scandals, proclaiming its republican or socialist ideals or testifying that it is burning the midnight oil, so as to promise the perpetuation of statist parasitism; just as the politicians, from parties that are large, small and minuscule, have done nothing but increase in number, and everyone wants to be an official or a representative, invested with any kind of authority. This shows us the setbacks produced in the popular mind by the systematic scorn for freedom experienced during the last fifty years, and by exposure to social democracy and authoritarian trade unionism; the task that lies before us consists in saving the ideas of freedom and human dignity from the corruption in which statism, blindly accepted by authoritarian socialism, has allowed them to fall. It will be an immense labor, but one that is indispensable for us.

To summarize these impressions, it seems to us that there is an unsavory truth, but we know we have to admit that, in what took place in Europe on the terrain of the active social struggles since 1917: the authoritarians have seized the initiative and still have it, which renders the best libertarian efforts impotent. The popular masses, from their point of view, see nothing but one socialist project, the authoritarian one; they do not see us and they do not understand us, and they go directly to the authoritarian victors, whose prestige makes them feel small since they have

not been distanced from the age old traditions of the masses accustomed to being ruled; they are for their new masters just as they were for their old ones.

Chapter 2

If this vicious circle that chains the authoritarian socialists to the eternal victims of their “Voluntary Servitude” is not broken by a serious libertarian initiative, everything will go from bad to worse and socialism in its entirety will enter a dark age and will be replaced by an even more authoritarian system, fascist slavery, for example, which is already knocking at the door; capitalism, nationalism and clericalism will stand behind it, they will take possession of it and the State, that is, the officials as a whole, will rally to it all at once where they are not already in the fascist camp.

If a social revolution were to take place today in these unfortunate countries, it would, in my opinion, change nothing. If such a revolution were to be victorious, it would only signify the victory of a socialist aristocracy that would be the graveyard of freedom and mark the eve of a regression to a deplorable condition, which fascism and the other cruel phenomena of our times pave the way for, but concerning which it is idle to speculate. In opposition to the authoritarian mentality of the socialists and the masses and their lack of the even the slightest degree of tolerance for the libertarians, the support that we would give to such a revolution would be deplorable in the sense that it would be contradictory to our ideas, which will encounter nothing but persecution at the hands of the new masters, just as was the case in Russia and will also be the case everywhere else.

It is of the utmost importance, then, to coordinate forces for a libertarian initiative. We must study very closely all the points of contact and support, the movements that still have a basis in voluntarism, free association, federation, the coexistence of various opinions, free experimentation, abstention from the state, and real internationalism. Such movements exist everywhere, but we attack them just as we are attacked; due to their impotence in the face of the victorious authoritarianism they seem quite insignificant to us, just as the European anarchy of our times appears to be of no importance to them, which is indeed an accurate assessment at the present time. It will never grow, of this I am sure, if it associates itself, so to speak, exclusively with one part of the syndicalist movement, which is, basically, a practical movement in the first place which cannot place the highest priority on ideas, however sincere the will of the comrades in the syndicates. European anarchism will only grow by means of the new vitality that will come from all the elements that have not been blinded by authority and which comprise the currents that I just described, along with all those who are disillusioned by the or-

gies of capitalist and socialist authority set loose upon today's world, and the even greater number of those who still have not been exposed to the weak voice of our propaganda. What is called for is not a united front with all these elements that remain outside the fascist statist and authoritarian socialist machinery, but the creation of a new mentality, a new state of mind, the anti-statist, free-associationist, and voluntarist impulses of men who do not hunger for authority and who are not blinded by it, and then we will see.

Will this take too long? I do not know, but I see no more direct route. If we really want anarchy, it is necessary to work in a way more or less like this. If all we want is simply some kind of authoritarian socialism, authoritarian to the core, that we will reject after having placed ourselves at its service and which will be detested in the long run, or, which is hardly any better, that will only be preserved by the fear of the reprisals that its collapse would entail, then all we have to do is leave the initiative to the others, to the authoritarians, and we will have to repeat the events of the last few years. Things are different, as I have already pointed out elsewhere, in a country like Argentina, where the libertarian current dominates the workers movement; there, all that needs to be done is to maintain its dominance, to strengthen it and to take action when the moment arrives. But in Europe anarchism finds itself lagging behind after the last few years of militarist, statist and communist authority, with the intoxication of its general successes, reinforced by general imbecility, so that it must not scorn any means to achieve its resurgence. Freedom is dying in Europe; how can anarchism prosper? One is not diminished by the admission that one is small, and that one has to start from a more solid and more extensive base. It would be less abstract, it would come closer to practical life, not to disdain the exercise of one's mind and one's muscles in tackling the most urgent problem of our time, and this cannot harm the chances for success.

The rate of progress of historical development, of the mentality of the masses, of the positions of the advanced parties, and the rate of progress of the elaboration of the ideas that inspire the most energetic minds of the vanguard, are quite different, and the same is true of the different factors mentioned above that move forward more rapidly or less slowly, some sooner than others. In the extremely rare cases where these very diverse rates correspond with each other, then there is a spirited impulse that is strong enough to build a bridge over the last obstacles, and a fertile revolution takes place, one that is really progressive, and a great step forward is taken. But this is very rare. If the world were to only advance by such revolutionary leaps forward, it would still be far behind where it is now; fortunately, it also advances by the quiet everyday labor that creates mentalities, dispositions, energies. I would be the last person to disparage revolutions, but as a result of being aware of the depth of the illness of the suffering parts of today's Europe — those parts where revolutions appear likely in a not-so-distant future (but are otherwise

dominated by fascism, nationalism or political socialism) — I maintain that these revolutions, products of poverty and permeated by authoritarianism, will be as remote from our idea of revolution as everything else that has taken place in the last few years, and during and after such revolutions we will be confronted by the same problem as before: they will absorb an even greater share of our forces, we will subsequently reject them and the libertarian current will be weaker than it was before. We will gain nothing and instead we will have experienced yet more losses.

No one would have ever believed, before the experiences of the last few years, that amidst this lack of sympathy for libertarian ideas something that will be called the German revolution would come in the footsteps of the Russian revolution, a very profound revolution that was nonetheless shackled by a usurping party, whose history I find just as uninteresting as the history of Napoleon one reads in a study of the French revolution; these events, Bolshevism and Napoleon, possess their own interest as masterpieces of unmitigated authority, which emerged from revolutions that did not know how to respect freedom and perished for that reason, but Bolshevism is no more the Russian revolution than Napoleon was the French revolution. I am not a Bonapartist for the same reason that I am not a Bolshevik, and for the same reason I would not be a communist if that party were to have any temporary success in Germany. These authoritarian revolutions really do not interest me; they will be cruel reprises of the Russian example which, in addition, was carried out, as was willingly admitted — if I am correct — with a certain ingenuousness and at very great risk, because the Bolsheviks, no more so than Bonaparte on the 18th Brumaire, were incapable of foreseeing that they would become the masters of great countries, which is what they would become shortly afterwards. But to strike the same blow a second time is as uninteresting as, for example, the accession of Louis Bonaparte, the future Napoleon III, who, after Strasbourg and Boulogne finally emerged victorious in December 1851. It is infinitely sad that the German people, after all those days of anxiety and indescribable suffering, was utterly incapable of doing anything to drive the revolution forward and remained the plaything of the most despicable authoritarians of every kind and tradition. In such situations, it is incumbent on the people to instruct themselves regarding the basics of freedom, and it falls upon the anarchists to unite those forces, even if they are only slightly libertarian, to create the current from which a libertarian initiative will someday emerge. And the same thing has to take place all over Europe, *mutatis mutandis*, in order to confront and defeat the authoritarian initiative which is today omnipotent and which has only triumphed so as to sow the seeds of fascism, stifling freedom.

The libertarian spirit is the one that will reanimate and create socialism; without it, socialism will be lost for a very long time, covered by a layer of fascism and the reactionary layers in its following.

Finally, if we were to contemplate these events from a more elevated point of view, a view we now lack, if we were capable of a view of the whole of the last twenty centuries as comprehensive as our view of the last few centuries, we might perhaps see that the social revolution was finally unleashed by the monstrous war that destroyed the equilibrium and the stability of capitalism which, despite the countries that took advantage of the situation and a few rich countries, is unable to put its business affairs in order, that this social evolution must first undergo the purification of the illnesses of childhood, the scarlet fever of authority, the smallpox of dictatorship, and the measles of social democratic politics, in order to reach the age of adolescence and adulthood in which, rejuvenated by the powerful vital forces of freedom, it will finally realize its potential in ways that we cannot foresee, but which will be the ones that are necessary to bring about freedom, that are consonant with the forces we will possess then. These forces exist not only under certain circumstances, or on certain occasions, they reside permanently in men, or else the result will be miserable. Open the cage door of a bird that was born in captivity and it will not come out, and if it does it will not know what to do and will die before it adapts to an unfamiliar freedom. Men, spiritually crushed by an ancient tradition of authority, cannot immediately adapt to freedom, any more than the poor bird born in a captivity: the first thing they will do is follow the first person who serenades them with an authoritarian air. Above all, their mentalities must change, they need to have faith in freedom, they need to be inspired once again with the taste, the desire for freedom that exists in almost everyone although in a latent state, but which is almost dead. Otherwise they will only switch from one authoritarian system to another and we shall bear witness, more or less powerless, to this spectacle that will also be the ruination of our hopes.

This is how the situation appears to me in those parts of Europe where the general conditions are leading to a situation that cannot last and which will finally result in a tragic ending in any case because not even a revolution, due to its inevitably authoritarian character, will bring any beneficial change. A worldwide libertarian initiative is the only thing that can contain the development of authoritarianism on all fronts, communist, fascist, militarist, capitalist and clerical.

Library.Anarhija.Net



Max Nettlau
After Six Years of Authoritarian Revolution
1923–24

Retrieved on July 22, 2012 from libcom.org
Translated from the Spanish translation available online at:
agitacionrural.no-ip.org

lib.anarhija.net