The Great Debacle

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I am asked to write an article for Mother Earth for its tenth anniversary. I do it gladly, for since it first appeared I have followed its career with a lively interest. I do not write this as a compliment, such as one makes a person one wishes to please. The proof of my interest in Mother Earth is shown by the articles and extracts I have translated and published from it. I have before me, at this moment, a collection of the most recent numbers of the French publications which I have been editing the past fifteen years. I need only glance through them to find these articles. Here, taken at hazard, are "The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation," by Emma Goldman; "The Dominant Idea," by Voltarine de Cleyre — two remarkable essays; "Tendencies of Modern Literature," by Zuckerman; "The Story of Annie," by Elizabeth Boole; a study of "Moses Harmon," by James F. Morton; another on "Manuel Pardinas," by Pedro Esteve. Then again I find a "Proclamation," by W. Curtis Swabey, and a poem, "The Revolt of the Ragged," by Adolf Wolff. I pass by, I need hardly mention, numerous quotations, etc., I have made. I believe this is eloquent testimony to my interest in Mother Earth.

I confess that I would like to write at greater length, and put more of joy into this contribution. I know the struggles and difficulties and opposition that a publication like Mother Earth encounters. To have resisted and existed so long in a country like the United States is a victory to be acclaimed by songs of triumph. But my mind is too preoccupied and my heart too torn to express the joy this anniversary calls forth. One subject only haunts me and torments me: the unquestionable bankruptcy of the movement of advanced ideas in our old Europe.

I do not belong either to the Socialists, or the Anarchist Communists, and their attitude did not surprise me very much. I have already seen too many turncoats and apostates. And the Individualists are not exempt. Still I confess that my imagination did not come up to the reality.

I ask myself if I am not dreaming when I see this Revolutionist abandoning the class struggle for the time being to assist in the national defense; and that Anarchist, as a diplomat emissary to neutral States, to put before them a scheme that will precipitate a gigantic conflict between millions of men. On the billboard opposite is an official poster, on which appears the names of high ecclesiastical dignitaries, the most reactionary men in the public eye, fused with the most ardent of the Socialist Deputies and the most popular leaders of Syndicalism. One need only read the letter of resignation of Pierre Monatte, of the Council of the *Confederation du Travail* to see whether I exaggerate.

I must say that the attitude of the intellectuals is not more encouraging. Among literary men, until now known as anti-nationalists; among scholars, renowned for their pacificism, one can count on one's fingers those who have protested against the war-fury let loose on Europe by the sinister International of War. Nearly all of them — the religious and the free thinkers, atheists and monks, those who incline toward the pen, and those who depend on speech — nearly all have joined the fighters. What a collapse!

I know well enough that revolutionists in neutral countries are writing and proclaiming the ideas of the old International of the workers, protesting against this stand of which I write, and are dreaming of revolution after the war. First of all, one may say, that it is not a great virtue to write like this in a neutral country, where one is quite sheltered, and one might ask what the attitude of the protestants would be if their country were drawn into the conflict. It is quite evident that those who favor the idea of insurrection ignore completely the state of mind of our opponents. One must be blind not to perceive that such a movement would have no chance of success. There exists a repression, worse perhaps, than that which crushed the Commune of 1871. It gives the governments an easy opportunity to impose silence — without a chance to reply — to the rare spirits who may have resisted in the first general disorder. It is on this handful of men that the mass of those who may escape from shot and sharpnel, excited by the paid press, will perhaps avenge themselves at the end of the war, for having been kept so long from home.

As it was impossible to prevent the massacre, and as it is impossible to stem it, much as we would, I believe that we ought to ask if we have not been deceiving ourselves until now about the value of our propaganda, as well as the way we have gone about it.

And here I wish, in all sincerity, to give the results of my experiences and my reflections.

I believe that the anti-authoritarian propaganda is at present incapable of touching and profoundly rousing a great number of men. I think that a movement of the masses has no chance to make itself felt without being strongly organized, disciplined like the military. I think that, generally speaking, human beings can not get along with authority. I think, too, that without a strongly centralized organization, it will be impossible to alter our economic conditions.

I am absolutely convinced that only a small minority, a very small minority, among men, are seriously reached and profoundly moved by our propaganda of criticism, of doubt, of rebellion, of free investigation, of independent research.

On the other hand, it is clear that our first interest lies always in seeking to increase this minority; to keep it, under all circumstances alive, active, refreshed. Our own happiness depends on it.

But we will not be able to keep alive a vigorous spirit of revolt in this small minority, if we give our propaganda a purely negative tendency, a tendency frankly destructive. Too often we do not stop to inquire where their preconceived ideas have disappeared when we give them a social morality of "a future society," a mature economic system — all of which is more than remote. Too often we have wished "to reconstruct their minds, without waiting to see whether "the destruction" was complete. It is our greatest fault.

Many of those with whom we come in contact believe in extra-natural ideas, in abstract aspirations, in far off results, in joys, not based on the senses, many, who would not wish to make a clean sweep of notions of "rights" and "duties" against the State and Society in all its domains (social, moral, intellectual, economic, etc). One must expect that the first crisis will leave them bewildered and ready to give up.

The free man says to himself: "No duty binds me to my fellowman or to my world that oppresses and exploits me, or maintains or contributes to that which oppresses and exploits me. Nothing more will I give to the man or the world that I despise. I do not give him or them any right to my person, my life or my production. Neither do I recognize that I have any right over the person, the life or the production of another. I reject all imposed solidarity, all forced fraternity, all coerced equality. I do not accept any association, except that which I freely choose and freely consent to, and reserve the right to break it off whenever I feel it may injure me." On the above must rest the existence of all enemies of authority. It is the *raison d'être* of their existence. It would be on this basis that theory and practice would really be efficacious, and this is how we must carry our anti-authoritarian propaganda to those who are interested.

Life is never a conserved phenomenon. It comprises, on the contrary, many phenomena essentially destructive. It is negation itself of fixity, it is a continuous selection, an incessant wear and tear. Everything annihilates and consumes itself. That is why a rebellion accomplished by individuals, without much idea of social reconstruction, comes much nearer being a vital action, it seems to me, than a revolution made by allied conspirators, of an organization with a well defined theory of communal happiness. The latter is altogether conservative; a governmental conception that must impose itself even on those who have no desire for communal happiness. This conception has nothing anti-authoritarian in it.

I am convinced that that only logical attitude that the enemy of authority and exploitation can adopt — practiced by one like the other — is an attitude of resistance, of objection and of opposition to all that threatens him — environment, institutions, individuals — that limit his development, and crush his personality. I think it is because the communist, revolutionist, or individualist propaganda neglected to insist on this essential attitude that we are the witnesses of the great debacle which is saddening all of us.

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