The duty of radicals toward Soviet Russia

and towards their own cause

Max Nettlau

October 16, 1924

Contents

I. 3
II. 6

I.

A symposium on this subject would elicit very different opinions; mine would be a very negative one on the first part of the question and all my interest goes to the second part. My reasons are about these.

During a century of active socialist life of every description unfortunately one important problem was not under serious discussion, namely, what will be done when after a collapse of the capitalist system several forms and shades of socialist thought were confronting each other? Theoretically and personally every one is persuaded of the superiority of his particular creed, but from this only common ground onward opinions widely differ: some consider every socialist system not their own as noxious, criminal, deserving only to be destroyed—others think that we are only at the very first beginning of a socialist evolution which by the natural process of growth of the efficient and of elimination of the worthless will produce in the course of ages higher and thoroughly viable forms of socialism which no present speculation, calculation or forecast can reveal to us. Consequently all socialist seeds ought to be sown on the soil of a new society, all germs ought to have a chance to develop and natural evolution would do the rest. These two opinions clash and no serious effort was made to come to an understanding, mainly because propaganda and organization absorbed most efforts and a sudden *local* collapse of the old system was not foreseen; all were hypnotized by the idea of an *international* social change which, however, they considered far off, as indeed it still seems to be. So the Russian events of 1917 found socialists as unprepared on this subject, as the war had found them on other questions in 1914.

Two palpable facts were before the socialists and libertarians of all shades of opinion when Tsarism had collapsed. First, their theoretical differences, as expressed, fostered almost, by ages of polemics which had not in the least ended with the theoretical victory of this or that section. Second, the knowledge that they had *all* combated tsarism and capitalism in good faith, with inenarrable [indescribable] devotion and sacrifices, with mutual solidarity on innumerable occasions in short, it is absolutely impossible to say who of the galaxy of fighters for Russian freedom contributed most to the final result, the anti-tsarist and anti-capitalist feeling of so many millions—was it Herzen or Bakunin, Tchernyshevsky, Kropotkin, or Tolstoy, the *narodnik*, the terrorist or the organized factory worker, the *intelligentsia* the student, the rebellious peasant or the soldier disgusted of further warfare? No one can raise the pretention to measure the value of all these contributions freely given with prodigality.

Hence it was obvious,—and will be so in the case of every similar revolution in any other country—that the fruit of the victory was the common property of *all* who had contributed to make it possible and who still co-operated to defend it.

The Russian revolution of 1917 had two distinct stages: the upheaval in March which resulted from the co-operation of bourgeois and socialist revolutionists, an impossible condition which soon led to the rupture between the bourgeois and nationalist socialists, bent on the continuation and intensification of the war, and the real revolutionists, socialists and almost all anarchists,—and the second stage, the sovietist revolution in November which the last-named, authoritarians and libertarians alike, propagated, executed and upheld during its most critical initial period (1917–18.) All who worked together in this, had an equal claim to put their ideas in practice, now the immense obstacles, the tsarist State and State protected bourgeoisism, were overthrown by

a general effort, to which certainly very many socialists of other shades, their narrow, fanatical or self-seeking leaders excepted, also lent a hand.

Thus socialism in the widest sense had an open field before it as never before in history and sooner than the wildest dreams of enthusiasts had ever imagined.

What deplorable use was made of these wonderful opportunities? Russian socialism become, from the hour of victory, like any conquered territory in war, the exclusive domain of one particular party or set of persons who formed a governing organism proclaiming and upholding by all governmental means their exclusive domination. All other socialists and libertarians since then had only the choice to submit and to serve this party or to keep the most humble silence or to be hunted down as malefactors by intensely cruel persecutions. This was and is an absolutely monstrous usurpation and it destroyed for those who saw through it, from the very beginning, every charm which the Russian Revolution, this immense local victory of socialist thought, would have had for them: how can those be expected to have any feeling for mankind, who hunt down and kill their own socialist and anarchist comrades? Noske, the German social democrat, had the communists shot down, to keep himself in power. Mussolini, the lifelong socialist had socialists, communists and anarchists fiendishly ill-treated or murdered, to get into power and to remain there. If these men have got a bad name, wherein do the bolshevist usurpers differ from them? They did for "the good of the people," some say—this is only a camouflage of the old "State reason" which prompts every act of governmental oppression, since governments exist.

Others will say: whenever did different systems of socialism, authoritarian and libertarian, coexist and how could they? Well, they will have to, as long as both tendencies possess self-conscious adherents and must their relations necessarily consist in constant war of mutual extermination? We have no experience whatever of socialism in practice and to jump all at once, in November 1917, to the conclusion that only one particular system is the right one and must be universalized by all means, was as presumptuous and void of elementary scientific insight, than it was monopolist fratricide against all other socialists. It was not for a moment the dictatorship of the proletariat, but always the dictatorship of persons and dogmas. It commands not even the nominal respect conceded to religious fanatics for their stubborn, consuming belief, since its principles, carried in practice by force, are constantly shifting and the only constant factor is the absolute will to remain in power, to perpetuate the usurpation.

There is nothing now in this; it leads us back to the oldest tricks of State—and priestcraft, just as Mussolini revived the age of the Borgia. Napoleon Bonaparte put his foot down and usurped the fruits of the French Revolution for fifteen years; Louis Bonaparte in 1851succeeded to snatch away for twenty years the harvest of 1848. Cromwell, the Lord Protector, made himself the exclusive heir of the English revolution of the seventeenth century. And the religious wars and the Inquisition and the Star Chamber show that the openly proclaimed fraternal love of religionists was and is concomitant to domineering, monopolist passions.

Such assaults of mankind by usurpers happen after authoritarian revolutions and when the air is saturated with militarism, the libertarian elements are yet too small and scattered and men like Lenin, Noske, Mussoline and others, carried upwards by the wave of authoritarian spirit fostered by years of ruthless war, got hold of what they could and know how to defend it. Their personal ideology—the two Napoleons also had an ideology of their own—is a secondary matter, as even the best ideas, imposed in this way, become repulsive and incalculable harm was done in this way to the socialist cause by the fratricidal usurpation covered by the fair name of socialism which we witness in Soviet Russia.

Do libertarians feel any duty towards these usurpers? No more, I should say, than these feel or practice towards enemies. Reciprocity is the primary condition of any duty. Sympathy would be wasted on them: do they feel any? So their only claim seems to be that they still hold out against a capitalist counter-revolution. This assures them of a practical immunity from genuine socialist who, now the harm has been done, make the best of it, but should not protect them from criticism and strictures. Their real merit is exceedingly small, if not negative. They "inherited" (by usurpation) the results of a century's devoted propaganda by so many, they seized and withheld from all other socialists the past accumulations, the whole machinery and the natural riches of an immense country, they inherited also the huge machinery of warfare, intensely developed by the war, they still intensified it and were able to repulse all attacks from without and from within, thanks to the solidarity of may socialists extended to them—who recognize no solidarity—on these occasions,—so they are perfectly able *now* and for some time to come, to take care of themselves. They are past masters in baiting the foreign capitalists and haggling and bartering with them. They can see their way to encourage capitalist production and commercialism within their boundaries which some still fancy to contain a communist paradise. They are up to the diplomatic game, playing out the old imperialist rights of Russia or the nationalist passions where it suits them, riding over such claims in their boundaries by centralization, as all strong governments do. Their hold on power is under these circumstance perfectly safe and I think we have other cares than those of the welfare of the present masters of Russia.

The Russian people we can but complain and try to help them. They are supposed to benefit, to be elevated to higher development by the official socialist education showered on them willy-nilly. In reality this imposition from above of a socialist State credo, trimmed with Marxist ideology, means only the forcible leveling and petrifaction of their minds and reminds one of old Chinese and Byzantine deadly conservatism. In all others countries there is progress by emulation and the workers have a chance to take a share in it; in Soviet Russia they are stuffed with Marxist ideology, seasoned according to the new or newest phases of economic policy or other expedients of the hour. The Russian workers are no longer a vanguard, without a fault of theirs (but their patience and "voluntary servitude") they are the rearguard, as the world moves on and wins experience and their masters condemn them to serve exclusively as illustration of their ever-changing amalgam of one-sided ideology and manifold expedients. The fact that by an immense artificial apparatus, supported also by many whom the *apparent* realization of socialism in Russia inevitably fascinated, similar groups or parties were formed in most other countries, does not in the least modernize this backward system which, as it excludes freedom, can only lead an artificial life in Russia and which the population of every other country, warned by this example, has been and is very shy to imitate.

The horrible breach of solidarity at its beginning, the deliberate continuation of the fratricide usurpation, makes sympathy of any form by libertarians impossible. The French republicans whose republic was twice killed by the two Napoleons, did not feel the duty of any sympathy towards these usurpers. The socialists and anarchists of all shades who after a century's hardest toil of theirs saw the Russian Revolution, their common property, snatched away from them by the Bolshevists according to the pashful principles of: first come, first served or: the devil take the hindmost, and the (other socialist) public be damned,—these men have no sympathy for the successful profiteers who reaped the fruits of the work of all and who have only contempt and police measures, prison and bullets for their fellow socialists.

If it is objected, that co-existence of authoritarian and libertarian socialists would have been and is impossible in any case, my reply is that, hard as it seems, a *modus vivendi* will have to be found and if this wonderful opportunity in Russia, 1917, this new start with unbounded means, energy and enthusiasm, was not an occasion for a fair trial, when shall ever such an occasion arise? Must it then be war as it is now? If so, then how can we be expected to sympathize with those who made this war inevitable?

But we should have to despair of the advent of real socialism and the common sense of mankind, if we considered the bolshevist episode as typical of the future of socialism. No, it was the outcome of narrow-minded fanati[ci]sm seeing the chance to seize power in an authoritarian, militarist age: the outcome was and is necessarily the absolute opposite of all that that is dear to libertarian socialists. Be our numbers small in this ultra-authoritarian milieu of our times, one duty will always be to remain true to our ideal and this is such a beautiful one, naturally and logically inevitable, that the temporary triumph of one of the many forms of unfree ideas in Russia can leave us indifferent.

II.

My previous remarks are not dictated by lack of interest in movements outside the libertarian sphere where I fell at home; on the contrary I do all I can not to merit the reproach of narrowness and lack of sympathy, but I cannot fail to see that present-day socialism and mental evolution has arrived at a very crucial stage.

The point is to me that the evolution of social feelings, the vague desire for social justice has, under the pressure of capitalist exploitation, developed in a quicker rate and on a larger scale that the desire for freedom which has been denied to men throughout so many ages and which in the higher sense, as we foresee it, has never yet fully existed at all. People remember earlier stages of greater economic freedom, but they have no experience of past mental freedom, since ignorance and beliefs inoculated by priestcraft and Statecraft are their only recollection and mental emancipation by knowledge and free thought lays still before them and is only attempted by small numbers.

Consequently most of the socialism of earlier centuries and of the capitalist nineteenth century is tainted with authoritarianism and contains but very nominal calls for freedom, and a minority only, the real libertarians, saw and propagated the inseparability of socialism and complete freedom. They were in unison with science, but science also is up til now only the ambient air of a minority, whilst the majority continues to live in the sphere of superstition, tradition, ignorance or scant and superficial information. The future belongs to science and freedom, knowledge and research, as the past belongs to religion and authority, ignorance and tradition. Socialism, as I said, spreading so widely at this juncture, to the traditionalist majority becomes an authoritarian gospel, to the scientifically incline minority a libertarian hypothesis, to which natural growth and experience will by and by give a consistent basis and point out the direction of further evolution.

Our duty as students and lovers of freedom is to facilitate this process by effort, example, experiment and action of every kind. We must not be discouraged or ashamed to be in a minority,—it cannot be otherwise, as long as there is a necessity for our work, that is, as long as our desire for freedom and our will to work for it are larger than those of average people. This does not mean isolation to us; it means specialization and intensification, essential component parts of

efficiency. No scientist ever felt lone, however far his research carried him from the throng of the day.

But it is of course an important part of our task to seek points of contact with the traditionalist authoritarian masses, be they in a state of indifference or be they touched to some degree by authoritarian socialism, and to win over those in whom our propaganda makes vibrate one of the chords of latent desire for freedom which every human breast virtually shelters.

What will be the attitude of authoritarian socialists? If they are not bigoted, they cannot fail to see that the cause of socialism is strengthened when men understand that intense and complete form of socialism which libertarian thought represents. But if they are narrow-minded and cheese-paring, they are bitter enemies of every propaganda except their own. Unfortunately, though for some years in the 'sixties the old International contained socialists of all descriptions, mostly even then looking daggers at each other, there was no time during a whole century to discuss this question in common: what to do with the different schools of socialism in the case of socialist possibilities and before then, in the course of propaganda. The war of everybody against all others in speeches, articles, pamphlets and books was the rule and the absolute want of mutual toleration, resulting in persecution and murder, as in Russia since at least 1918, was and is the absolute rule.

I still think that, hopeless as the task appears to be, efforts to come to an understanding will some day have to be made, as evidently the chance for a realization of socialism will not arise at precisely the moment when almost all socialists will be authoritarians of one single school, nor when almost all will be some kind of libertarians, but at some intermediary stage as in 1917, when socialists and libertarians of every description will coexist *de facto* as they do now. Is the dictatorial usurpation of 1917 to be the glorious predecessor in coming eventualities? Some fanatics no doubt will say: yes, by all means! But perhaps some may find it worth[while] to think this over. Anyhow, one of our real duties seems to be to set this point clear and to try to make common sense and common fairness prevail, I need not say here in which direction,—that of mutual agreement to disagree and to live as neighbors do, or that of fratricide.

I am in no way advocating the policy of the so-called unique front,—by no means. In a case of real action it is self-evident that all revolutionary forces will take part, but even then those working for a dictatorship or a revolutionary parliament and government, cannot form a unique front with those determined not to admit authoritarian reconstructions such as these. What will be done on such occasions, cannot be foresee and must depend of the relative strength of each faction and on this, whether they have previously reasoned out themselves and discussed with the other side what they will do or whether, as heretofore, everything will be left to haphazard. In ordinary times we have, I believe, much better work to do to expand and fortify our own front, than to work with those from whom we are radically separated.

The principle of *authority* and *freedom* marks a deeper separation than is often imagined. At this point really past and future divide. There is only one line of evolution, the natural one, but in the remote past the mildew of authority fell on the minds of primitive people, ignorant and afraid of the unknown, and it has since then infected and poisoned all their institutions. With the greatest difficulties and sacrifices a few instincts, that of solidarity and voluntary association and that of independence and revolt, also that of free research and experiment were preserved untainted here and there and with their help by and by, very slowly, free thought, free science and the desire of independence and free co-operation, as expressed in our libertarian ideas, were restored and are now small beds of really humanitarian germs from which the free society of the

future will arise, come what may. This sphere is our real home and it is important above all that it be preserved against all inroads of the authoritarian thought which belongs to the past, be it painted red all over as some variety of authoritarian socialism or communism.

Class feeling, solidarity, the contact of everyday life and work, are inevitable and normal; we must not desert our milieu, but we must not be absorbed by it. Libertarians often give too much to neighboring, parallel causes and make too little of their own. Being small in numbers this still reduces their efficiency. There is so much to do on our own side, if only our idea is property expanded. *Freedom* is so full of contents, of possibilities, of application and its application to social matters, producing the different affirmations of anarchism (individualist, communist and other varieties) is but one of its various applications: it must enter into every form of human individual and collective feeling and activity and banish from them the spirit of authority and that absence of any spirit, dull routine. Our task and duty is to persuade people of this by intelligent reasoning and our own example, if we can, and not to limit ourselves to preconise a system of economic arrangements supposed to bar authority forever. No, we must attack and track authority and more thoroughly, in mind, in daily life, in all feelings and actions, ours and those of everyone in our sphere of influence. To the worldwide party of authority, extending from conservatives and militarists, nay fascists to communists, we must at last oppose the manifold groups of human manifestations of freedom, free thought, free art, moral and sexual freedom, free science, voluntary association, private and personal freedom to those groups applying freedom to social co-operation, the various libertarian and anarchist groups, be they revolutionist, syndicalist, educationalist, experimentalist or otherwise more or less specialized. This I feel to be a prime duty to our cause.

This is not meant in the sense of an organization or even a loose federation of all these element often little known to each other and separated, as inevitable, by differences of opinion, also of interests. We can begin, informally, to get in touch with those whom we recognize as genuine practisers of freedom, be it in a limited sphere, we can encourage them, enlarge their views, but we must not doctrinairize them; some will evolve further under such efforts, others may not. If we cannot rouse them to action, we may rouse their opinion, their temperament, make them speak up, stand up for freedom as best as they can. We have lost nearly everything, no end of socialists and syndicalists who formerly seemed to patronize freedom, when it stood before them in the brilliant personalities and writings of Elisée Reclus, Kropotkine and Tolstoy, when the war and dictatorial communism had not poisoned their minds,—many of these weak and wayward lingerers who would not have opposed freedom formerly, are now again believers in authority which is so much more familiar to them. We must reconstruct *radical*, if possible *libertarian, public opinion* almost from the beginning, though, I fondly hope, when a real start has been made, it will grow by leaps and bounds, rallying the many who are disgusted with the present orgies of authority and stand aside.

All this must be done in unconspicuous forms, but with a will and the harvest of this libertarian initiative may be rich. New blood, new ideas will come to our more intimate ranks and we need them. The immense rally of authority these last years certainly calls for a rally of freedom. We can hardly to imagine how good, but also how wide, large, deep and all important to mankind our cause is and shall be, but we must rise up to it and help on it fullest manifestation. This I consider our paramount duty to our cause and the present moment and flirtations with Soviet Russia are lamentably out of date in this age of deadly struggle between slavery and freedom.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Max Nettlau
The duty of radicals toward Soviet Russia
and towards their own cause
October 16, 1924

Retrieved on 11th May 2023 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org

theanarchistlibrary.org