

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Agnes Henry

Anarchist Communism in its Relation to State Socialism

June 1896

Liberty: A Journal of Anarchist Communism

Original text split between two consecutive monthly publications, with a misprint in the latter citing the first entry as having been published in July rather than June; transcribed from Liberty: A Journal of Anarchist Communism (June 1896) and Liberty: A Journal of Anarchist Communism (July 1896) on the Internet Archive.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Anarchist Communism in its Relation to State Socialism

Agnes Henry

June 1896

The question of how for Anarchist Communism agrees exactly with State Socialism, and the exact line that divides them, has long seemed to me one that it would be well to enter into. And just now, in view of the approaching International Congress, seems a time particularly appropriate for this consideration. For surely it would be well to have reflected before hand what common action is open to us, together with those bodies of Socialists with whom in some respects we differ. For if there be no such common ground what have we got to do with them? The mere fact that both State Socialist and Anarchist Communist movements are in the main working class movements, is surely not sufficient reason for us to attempt to unite with them.

This question has already been dealt with in a German academical periodical, "Der Sozialistische Akademiker," (Berlin) during some months of 1895, under the title of "Anarchy in Relation to Communism." Under Anarchy, the author "Catilina," treats separately of Individualistic and then of Communistic Anarchy. Communism is for him practically identical with Socialism, for, he main-

tains, Socialism once established would inevitably develop into Communism. Writing also from a German point of view, the Socialist party is equivalent to the Social Democratic party.

According to the German writer, the common opinion that there is a fundamental or radical difference between Anarchism and Socialism (or Communism) is erroneous, and arises chiefly from the different method of reasoning adopted by each party, or in consequence of the difference in tactics employed.

He examines carefully the position of the Individualist Anarchist, showing logically that economic necessity—the fact that the individual cannot by his own efforts satisfy his own needs—forces him, *nolens volens*, to associate and cooperate with his fellows. Under which circumstance he is obliged to restrain many of his individual inclinations, in consideration of others, up to the point necessary to obtain that higher freedom which depends upon the possibility of gratifying his permanent and the greater number of his constant needs. Consequently Individualist Anarchism leads inevitably in the end to Communism, or if it lose sight of its object—the greatest possible liberty to each and all, and follows a phantom, the impracticable “living out” of every desire, regardless of every thing, even freedom—its inevitable result will be a return to the individualistic capitalism of today.

As to Communistic Anarchism, the argument is that it is identical with Communism, recognising the necessity of organising production. But that the organisation should be complete for the whole country, a certain amount of centralisation is necessary, therefore the only difference between this and Socialism lies in the dictum that Socialism grants “to each according to his work”, while the Communist dictum is “to each according to his needs”. This latter, however, can only be when an ample sufficiency to cover the possible needs of all is secured. With the improvement in production under Socialism this in the end would follow.

This conclusion, that Communist Anarchism is identical with Communism, is, I should say, quite the opinion of the Communist

Some may say that this means renunciation of the revolutionary attitude. If revolution meant necessarily violent rebellion, this would be true. But as violent rebellion on behalf of

Anarchy would defeat its own end—it would be worse than useless. But revolution means, even more correctly speaking, "a radical change," and has only in a derivative sense come to be applied to violent rebellions. Revolution, therefore, as I understand it, means the accomplishing of a radical change, irrespective of the means employed.

In this instance, when the change to be brought about is intended to be the substitution of Anarchy in place of chaos, the only weapons suitable must be those of peace. reason and the spread of knowledge, a steadfast though peaceful resistance to war and violence in all their forms, active participation in every effort towards Socialist organisation—these are the means by which Anarchy will be won, and these will be strengthened by sympathetic recognition, and cooperation in like efforts undertaken by those State Socialists, opposition to whom is at once a source of weakness to the Anarchist Communist and an injury to the general cause of Socialism.

There are signs of such fraternity being realised. The attitude taken by such men as Edward Carpenter, J C. Kenworthy, Walter Crane, and others, towards all parties; the fact that some party journals, such as "Liberty," and the "Weekly Times and Echo," publish the views of all parties; and the expressed desire of such a man as William Morris for a closer union, not only among the various State Socialist bodies, but also with the Anarchist Communists—are all indications of what might, and we trust soon will be realised.

Anarchists themselves. There remains, however, the fact, that two kinds of Communism are possible—an imposed Communism, in which every individual is compelled, not merely by economic necessity, but by physical force to submit to the instituted arrangements, whether he will or not. The other, that Communism which would arise from economic necessity and social human instinct alone, without any external physical force instituted to maintain it. The power of these—State Communism, like compulsory State Socialism, or State maintained capitalism—all alike being based on the principle that "might is right" would not be identical with Anarchist Communism. This maintains that right cannot be secured by force, and that where such force reigns social harmony is impossible.

As to tactic, "Catilina" points out that Socialists (i.e., Social Democrats) alike avail themselves of propaganda by speech and press, to spread the conviction of the desirability and necessity for the abolition of the present social system, and hasten the establishment of the socialistic or communistic system. "Propaganda by deed" he does not dwell on, as he considers it "as good as abandoned, at least in Western Europe." The Socialists, however, make use also of parliamentary means, both as affording them greater publicity, as well as freedom of speech, while the Anarchists reject this method as giving greater power to the State. He evidently thinks that the improvement in the material status of the proletariat, to be gained by parliamentary means, would be very slight indeed hardly worth reckoning; and he admits that the political method of attempting to affect an economic change must always be a point of difference between the Anarchists and the Social Democrats.

There is, however, another branch of propaganda upon which Anarchists are divided, and Social Democrats have shown themselves hitherto on the whole very indifferent. This is the organising of working men in trade unions, with a view to the unanimous and universal control of labour, as well as the establishment of socialis-

tic cooperatives—at first distributive, with the object of becoming productive cooperatives. Here, he indicates, is common ground on which Social Democrats and Anarchists might unite, while still carrying on their respective agitations for or against State control.

Here, I think, this writer, is certainly right. Why should not Communist Anarchists and State Socialists unite in every endeavour to bring about more complete organisation among the workers, as well as encourage and assist in every effort for even partial substitution of cooperation for competition. Above all, a propaganda inducing the existing cooperative associations to work hand in hand with labour organisations, as they are now doing in France, in the matter of the Working-men's Glass-works at Carmeaux, would be of great advantage to the cause of Socialism. There can be no question at all that with federal union between labour organisations and cooperative associations, with a corresponding boycott of the small individualistic trader, the working class could at once effect an enormous improvement in their economic status, and at the same time largely supplant the capitalistic system. This propaganda could be perfectly common ground for Anarchist Communists and State Socialists. It would hasten the downfall of capitalism, while inducing more fraternity of spirit among all Socialists, whatever their difference on certain points, which itself would mean a step towards realising brotherhood amongst mankind, based upon an acknowledged common interest and a common hope.

When, however, "Catilina" concludes that, there being so very little difference between the two parties, and identity in their ultimate aim, the Anarchists ought not to stand outside, but incorporate themselves with the Social Democrats, on the ground that they are too weak a party to effect a sensible propaganda outside it, we cannot agree with him. He says the Anarchists must in the end admit that the great majority of the working men belong to the Social Democratic party, and that therefore propaganda outside that party is ineffective. Here, to say the least, he limits his view to Germany

every instance. Notwithstanding, therefore, that many Anarchists illogically approve of violent acts of rebellion, their propaganda makes for peace, which is the first necessary basis on which equality can arise out of the present inequalities, and fraternity follow the present divisions and animosities.

Let it not, however, for a moment be supposed that this peace is synonymous with passive submission. Quite the contrary. It is that peace alone which arises out of the reasonable understanding of the causes of all social evils, with the consequent insight into the fact that they can only be cured by a process of reformation and of increasing propaganda and passive resistance against the exercise of those compulsory institutions which are the support of the said causes of social evil.

This recognition of the evil of compulsion is the only essential difference between the Anarchist Communist and the State Socialist. So soon as this is admitted by both parties there is little doubt that the State Socialist will quickly acknowledge that "Right is stronger than Might," and that the exercise of might, even by government, to compel right is not only inadmissible but defeats its own end. Consequently they will recognise that the character of government must be changed before it can be made a source of good and not of evil.

While the Anarchist Communist, too, would see that organisation, which they admit to be necessary, is government divested of compulsory or despotic power. Also that, to be logical, it cannot be admitted that violent action in individuals can lead to the abolition of violence in government. Violence in government must necessarily cease when the supporters of the government cease to believe in the necessity or justification for violence. In short all history, as well as common sense, tells us what is obtained by violence has always to be maintained by violence; and certainly no Anarchist Communist could admit that a state or system of society maintained by violence could be Anarchy.

minority of Socialists in Parliament. So soon—which would not be long—is the crucial point arrived which meant evident surrender of the capitalistic or the socialistic interest, both parties believing in recourse to violence, war—civil war—would inevitably be the result. Or, in case the Socialists wisely considering that peace at any price were better, for what is gained by violence can only be maintained by violence, and such violence would fatally interfere with effective administration for the good of all. Then the best they could do would be to hold the ground they had gained, practically remaining stationary, until such time as the public had learnt that Might is not synonymous with Right, and when the cooperative movement, hand in hand with the increased organisation of trade unions, shall have considerably changed the face of economic affairs, then, finally—but not till then—can the State Socialists gather together in a non-compulsory administrative Parliament all the various representatives of the already existing productive and distributive associations, thus facilitating and completing the realisation of a socialistic organisation.

To conclude: the State Socialist, although recognising the necessity of the development of the administrative functions of local and national government, fails to recognise the evil compulsion by violence in government, which latter evil, unresisted, threatens to turn what would be a useful administration into a tyrannical code. The Anarchist Communist, on the other hand, although recognising that organisation is necessary recognises in government only its compulsory, despotic function, and holds therefore that the organisation of a truly Socialist (or Communistic) society must be going on outside government, by the spontaneous efforts of the people themselves.

While the State Socialist only condemns judicial sentences in certain instances, and seems at best to regard judicial powers as a necessary evil, the Anarchist condemns them utterly in the name of reason and justice, and would refuse to make use of them in

alone. Besides which he forgets that a small dissenting minority may be easily gagged within a centralised powerfully dominated party, and so not be able to make itself head amidst the mass.

It seems also somewhat premature to conclude that the Anarchist party is too insignificant to be influential, considering the comparatively short time that any Anarchist party has been in existence in Germany. The constant dissensions which break out within the Social Democratic party also indicate that the dominance of that party is not or will not long remain as firmly established as has hitherto been the case. In addition to which the Anarchist Communists in Germany are, at the present moment, throwing themselves with heart and soul into the trade unions agitation, and indications have not been lacking that their influence in that direction has been by no means insignificant.

But by far the most important fact he loses sight of is, that the advance of any kind of Socialism whether Anarchistic or State, is an international and not a national question. Whereas in Germany the Social Democrats may have established their footing, and so to say covered the ground, that is by no means the case in other lands. In Spain and Italy there is no question that the majority of the Socialists are Anarchists also, while in France it is a well known fact that the majority of the working men's unions are Libertarian Socialist, i.e., opposed to the conquest of political powers—for all practical purposes, Anarchistic; while in Holland a very considerable minority, if not half of the Socialists are the same. As to England, most of the trade unions are not Socialistic, but are on the whole opposed to politics, while among such Socialist bodies as the I. L. P. and the Brotherhood Church, etc., a good number of their eminent members are quite as anxious for the development of the "self-help" methods of social evolution, independently of political action, as for the conquest of political powers. Consequently, taking the continent and Great Britain together, the ascendancy of the Social Democrat party is no such established fact after all.

On the whole, then, although the German article alluded to contains much clear-sighted and useful criticism of both parties, distinguished as Anarchistic opposed to Socialistic (which itself is erroneous, as, undeniably, both Collectivist and Communist Anarchism are forms of Socialism) it still does not convincingly establish the necessity or desirability for the Anarchists to incorporate themselves with Social Democrats. Nor does it, in my opinion, really indicate the true point of difference between the two parties.

In order to know exactly what we are talking of, it is necessary to define as nearly as possible what we mean by the terms "Anarchist Communism" on the one hand, and "State Socialism" on the other.

This, with regard to the word Anarchist, is not such an easy matter, owing to the fact that the Anarchists have never established exact definitions of the chief terms they constantly employ. Every Anarchist knows that "Anarchy means order", Anarchy means "no master", "no authority", "no government", etc. But what is order, what is a master, what is authority, what is government?

All these terms admit of different interpretations. For instance: Balfour's rule in Ireland established "order" for many people (the way in which he did it does not come into account). But this certainly is not the "order" conceived of by Anarchists.

As to "master", in most civilised countries today—in France, Italy, Germany, and even Russia, the schoolmaster is not a man with a rod in his hand—England remains almost alone in this barbarism, but the "master is one who teaches, who speaks with the authority of knowledge; the compulsion he exercises, when he has need of it, is not that of brute force.

But let us now consider more particularly the dictum "Anarchy means no government", as that is the point of view in which Anarchy stands opposed to State Socialism.

Malatesta, in his "Anarchy", makes it exceedingly clear that all governments, of whatever form—in every age, have been empow-

erment, owing largely to the fact that the French constitution is much more despotic and military than ours. The magistrature, too, is a political tool in a way that in Great Britain we do not know. If the State Socialist should take this last admission—that is the more despotic character of the French government—as counteracting my argument against municipal and political Socialism, I ask him what has this Socialism done to counteract this despotism? Absolutely nothing. On the contrary, there is nothing more evident than the absence among the State Socialists of any idea of the irrationality and uselessness of violent compulsion as a means of government to cure social ills. Their organ, "La Petite Republique," is continually full of the cry to bring this or that culprit to Justice, while at the same time, in certain cases—and they are many—they are quick enough to expose the fact that the so-called Courts of Justice are rather courts of injustice. These are, however, the cases where the culprits are Socialists. Never, I find, do they seem to have an inkling that resort to violence is only necessary in a government to protect what is evil, and that no government can be sound or good which rests on other support than the interest of the people.

The most that the French Socialist deputy asks is for a slight reformation of the judicature, making it more conformable to the English system!

We might add that modern history clearly shows that the more democratic a country is, under the present violently maintained social system, the more tyrannical and corrupt the government, as in the United States of America, the Republic of France, and, now every day increasingly, the Republic of Switzerland. And in proportion as Democratic Socialism asserts itself, this tendency seems rather to increase than to decline, judging from the loudly expressed wishes and intentions of its eminent leaders.

But to recognise the danger in our own country of such a one-sided advance we have only to consider what must be (and what I have heard certain enthusiastic Social Democrats affirm will be) the result, so soon as there should be a really effective militant

means of government, is generally recognised. And this the State Socialist appears not to do, neither theoretically nor practically.

Take for instance the municipalisation of the gas and water supply and tramway service, which has been forced upon certain towns, not through the organised and united effort of all classes of the community, or by a voluntarily instituted cooperative effort, but by an effective minority, generally, of the compulsorily governing body, who have seen in these measures an economic advantage to be gained for the ratepayers, which would redound to their own (the governing body's) glory and power. But although their clients, the general public, may have gained some advantages, the labouring class—the employees in these concerns, have been no better off, in some cases even worse, as in the case of the Glasgow tramway men. Thus such Socialistic efforts enforced by the compulsory powers of government are, under the present helpless and disorganised condition of the workers, nothing more than companies or rings, with despotic political power added to the power of wealth—or the control of wealth, which amounts to the same thing. They have, therefore, attached to them the evils of the same capitalistic system, with the additional evil of political coercion. Of course it will be said they are public, changeable, dependent upon the vote of the people. But it is idle to imagine that a heavily burdened, overworked, or destitute and unorganised proletariat can have voting power enough to counteract all the bourgeois and despotic governing powers arrayed against him, in their own interests, which are always opposed to those of the labouring class.

To see what little effect this municipal-political Socialism has on the freeing of the proletariat from the tyranny of capitalism and government, we need only take a glance at France, where it is so much more developed than in Britain. There we find Socialist mayors, Socialist town councillors, etc., etc., and a very much more highly developed municipal Socialism than with us; but we do not find that the workingman is for all that a whit nearer economic emancipation, while he is decidedly behind us in political eman-

ered to exercise physical force against those who opposed their dictates. This function has indeed been the chief object of the existence, but they would not always, nor by all peoples, have been tolerated, had it not been for another function, which has however always been secondary, and in most cases more a profession than a reality, namely, the function of administration for the public good—or at least, as the British Liberal would admit, for the good of the classes represented in government.

Now this function, although, as already said, it has always been secondary compared to that of exercising physical violence, has nevertheless differed in its proportion to the latter, in different governments. I am convinced that a careful examination will show that where governments have been least oppressive they have been proportionally more administrative. The more military a power is, the more oppressive it is; so the less oppressive the more administrative it is. Therefore rather more upon the character of the government than upon its quantity depends the degree of the individual freedom of the subject. This it is which has made the essential difference between the British constitution and those of other lands, not, as many of our foreign comrades put it, that we have "less government", for the British are an essentially politics-loving people, taking a more widespread and lively interest in their national politics than perhaps any other European nation.

Now if this be accepted, as I believe it reasonably must be, the development of the administrative function in favour more and more of ever; class in the community would gradually transform a compulsory government, oppressive to many, into an administrative government advantageous to all. When the object of government became to administrate in the genuine interests of the community—those interests being, as a matter of fact, for the most part identical, the result would be that—in the first instance—there would not exist the same amount of interest in opposing the administration; and, secondly, the public would gradually come to recognise

that nothing but what is in itself objectionable can be upheld by such an irrational method as that of physical compulsion.

(To be completed in the July number.)

(Continued from the July number.)

This leads us to the recognition that the word, "government" includes two distinct ideas, the one the exercise of violence, the other, the administration of public affairs. Were the development of the latter to proceed as above described, there would be little ground left for Anarchists to object to "government". Take away the former function, which has been hitherto the predominating one, and the word no longer means that which all Anarchists recognise in it. Consequently, what the Anarchist mean when he says: "Anarchy means no government", is, more exactly defined, Anarchy means no despotic government; despotic, being "tyrannical", having "absolute control" over others. (See "Walker's Dictionary")

"But how"? I hear many of my comrades exclaim : even a purely administrative government is not to be heard of under Anarchy ! Before answering, I would ask them to allow me first to proceed with Communism.

Communism supposes, to start with, the socialisation of the means of production, in common, with every other form of socialism. Further than this we may say it means such an organisation of production and distribution as would secure to everyone working according to his capacities the full satisfaction of his needs. Such an organisation would evidently necessitate some administration. However autonomously the groups of workers carried on their various branches of production, it would be necessary, for instance, for every commune to know the number of its inhabitants to be supplied with bread. Agricultural labourers, millers, and bakers—all these having their separate unions, would require to federalise in order to know, in every commune, and again throughout the whole land, what was required to meet the communal and the national demand for their products. To obtain the exchange of foreign products, one country would require to know the total amount of the

demand for their exports, and to formulate the demand for their imports, etc. Consequently federal, national, and international administration would result under Communism also. It would all the time be nevertheless Communism for every one to start with, would freely satisfy his needs, and his social as well as his personal interests would induce him to work according to his capacity. Therefore it is correct to say that in relation to government the Anarchist Communist opposes despotic or tyrannic, but not purely administrative, government.

Now let us turn to State Socialism. Government, according to the State Socialist's ideal, cannot be other than administrative government, securing to every one of the community access to the means of production, and also satisfaction of his needs, "according to his work." It must, however, in justice be remembered in regard to the latter phrase that a Socialist government would provide for the full satisfaction of the needs of the old, infirm, incapable, and the young; and as every normally healthy and capable individual could and would in co-operation with others easily produce more than the value of the satisfaction of his own needs, he would practically receive according to his needs. Consequently the difference between Socialistic and Communistic administration amounts almost to nil, both being carried on with a view to the genuine satisfaction of the needs of the community.

Where, then, rests the difference, if both the Anarchist Communist and the State Socialist are intent upon instituting such administration as shall ensure the public good and individual liberty, for liberty is nothing more nor less than the possibility to satisfy one's needs? Simply in this: the State Socialist, while sincerely striving to delope the administrative function of government, does not recognise the evil effect of the compulsory function. He may claim, as said above, that with the development of the former will follow the disuse and consequent decay of the latter function. But this is only true in proportion as the evil of the exercise of physical force, as a