

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



The Old and New in Anarchism

Alexander Atabekian

Alexander Atabekian
The Old and New in Anarchism
1918

Original translation of Старое и новое в анархизме.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

1918

Contents

Preface	5
The Old and New in Anarchism	9

Theoretical anarchism is a *science*; its practice must become an *applied science*.

self-preservation and logically led to the October Revolution and to the complete international exhaustion of Russia.

The world war destroyed *the foundations of the capitalist economy*, while the October revolution continues its work and destroys the very *forms of the capitalist system*.

Like the war, the October Revolution, too, by its destruction, awakens to life the creative forces of the masses in various new forms of association and mutual aid, that mighty factor of progress scientifically studied by Kropotkin.

But the new power has already had time to create its *corporate interests* and *professional privileges*; it realises that its end lies in the association and manifestations of the self-activity of the people, and therefore it supports and foments in every possible way the general enmity and discord ready to be extinguished.

There is no reason to expect that the natural course of history itself will lead us inevitably to the realm of socialism. We have seen above that the ideology of the International, built on this automatic development of the historical factors of the process of the concentration of capital and the differentiation of society into two separate classes, is far from being justified. The same will be true of any theory resting on the natural play of more or less correctly grasped engines of social development.

The ideologist of scientific anarchism, Kropotkin, does not confine himself to the mere analysis of the structure of society and the study of the factors of its modifications; he calls upon "*all men with heart, mind and knowledge*" to apply all their energies to *the reorganisation of society*.

In other words, the anarchist labour movement must not become a mere political party seeking only the abolition of state power, but must develop into an organised factor in consciously influencing the course of history by fruitful construction.

Preface

It is hard to imagine a deeper desolation, a more complete moral decay than that which Russia is now experiencing.

Not a single pillar of legal and ethical human relations has survived... Senseless pogroms, brutal lynchings, premeditated murders right down to arrested patients in hospital beds, administrative shootings – have become commonplace. The trampling of the most elementary human rights – personal freedom and personal dignity, inviolability of the home, freedom of speech and the press, freedom of meetings, unions, demonstrations, strikes – has become a common method of struggle by those in power against their real or imaginary opponents. The shameful travesty of justice, which has left far behind it the arbitrariness of the bureaucratic courts of tsarist times, – the complete disregard by yesterday's comrades in prison, penal servitude and exile of the courts of arbitration and courts of honour, these valuable corrections to all state justice, – the official appeals of the "socialist" authorities to the population for denunciations and enquiries, with the promise of material rewards, – the extortion of sums of money under the guise of judicial and administrative penalties for imaginary offences (one cannot enumerate everything!) – this is the culture which is being imposed by the ruling parties. The loss of the people's sense of self-preservation before a strong external enemy, and the vile aggression towards the seemingly weak provinces for the mere fact that they have not developed to the perception of the socialism of the industrial centres and wave away its imposition by the demoralising methods of the central power, and next to the Oriental flattery of the religious fanaticism of the Muslims of the whole world – this is, in general terms, the level of moral decline to which Russia has fallen during the reign of Bolshevism.

And yet the cause is not Bolshevism – although the *Bolshevik intelligentsia* must be held responsible for the violations of the most

elementary ethical norms of cultured people, which they actively participated in — the cause is deeper: *the cause is the long world war*.

Mankind, bleeding and impoverished, is also drinking to the bottom of the cup of moral decay, presented to it by the monster of war.

The moral foundations of the peoples of Russia, who for centuries had been under the specific oppression of autocracy, were not strong; they were sooner and more deeply decayed than in Western Europe, and gave rise to the rampant moral licentiousness that we are now experiencing.

The international war, which had been hushed up on the Russian fronts, has spread inland, has turned into protracted internecine wars, which continue to deepen the moral decomposition of the country...

But there must be an end, there must be a way out of the situation!

People's self-consciousness itself suggests where to find it. If you look thoughtfully at the life around you, it is not hard to see: people are looking for a way out of the suffocating moral atmosphere *through total social justice*.

Never before, since the first centuries of Christianity, have ideas possessed the minds and souls of the masses of people so much as in our era.

Bolshevism does not hesitate to meet this thirst for social justice, and this is its strength.

But to achieve its higher aims it does not confine itself to preaching, but uses the obsolete apparatus of power — an unsuitable means of influencing social development in the new stages of civilisation. The classical instrument of oppression cannot turn into an instrument of free socialist construction: the practice of Bolshevism has clearly proved this to us.

With unsuitable weapons, they set out to conquer the new world.

ence in the activities of the All-Russian Zemsky Union and other public organisations. The business of organising aid to millions of refugees — to whole nations — became a school of practical socialism. Then the activity of public organisations spread to the greatest part of the population. It was their fruitful activity that created our food organisations and developed the initial technique of supplying and distributing foodstuffs.

War, that factor of discord, oppression and destruction, this time became fruitful and constructive. This was because, in its unprecedented size and duration, it shook up the entire economic life of the globe. It became a literal war of nations and subjugated all strata of society to its equalising demands.

It has barely disguised the extensive expropriations of private property by the name of requisitions; it has destroyed free trade by *fixing prices*; it has sought to equalise all strata of the population by food organisations for the equal distribution of essential foodstuffs. In short, the foundations of the capitalist system have been struck blow by blow, and this not only in our own country, but to an even greater extent in central and western Europe. The stronghold of class divisions, governmental power, has so far survived, but even in it large holes have been punctured.

The devastation of the war itself has caused a wide scale of social endeavour and the moral unification of the whole society. The extent of the destruction of the war in the same measure awakens public initiative. In the struggle against this united initiative of society, the autocracy collapsed.

The socialist parties, which became masters of the situation after the February revolution, endeavoured in vain to strengthen the remnants of social unity that had been shaken under the old regime and to direct them along socialist lines. Their own ideology of class struggle itself carried within itself the factor of destroying this natural desire to save the whole of society by uniting for defence.

The ideas of the International, widely sown in the masses by socialists of all persuasions, took precedence over the instinct of

remained deaf to the repeated romantic appeals made to them by the Russian socialists after the February Revolution.

“The German nation is not yet conscious that the plan to enrich the German nation by a sudden attack on its neighbours and by rapid conquests in the West and in the East, *has failed*,” says Kropotkin.³

When they truly realise this, then they themselves will give up the quest for world economic domination. Only then will they recoil from the logic of their capitalist system and, in harmony with all the peoples of the civilised world, seek new paths and new beginnings for their domestic and international prosperity.

And for the German nation to understand this, self-defence is necessary, struggle is necessary, for *in struggle we shall gain our right* to independent socialist development. For the success of the struggle, however, we need unification.

“The unification of all strata of society in one common cause induced by it (the war) will not pass without a trace, but will lay the rudiments of a more united life,” said Kropotkin at the very beginning of the war.⁴

This unification of all strata of society in Western Europe has already begun to bear fruit, it is rebuilding the social order on new principles more methodically and firmly than we have in Russia; this reorganisation of the social order of the West is pointed out by Kropotkin in his “Letters on Current Events”, and only due to poor knowledge, due to the conditions of wartime, we can not take a closer look at this creative side of life in Europe, caused by the current war.

In Russia, this association emerged and blossomed in the direction of social construction in the early years of the war. It found a wide field of practical application, rich material and useful experi-

³ Kropotkin P.A. Open Letter to Western European Workers. [M.: Pochin, 1918].

⁴ Kropotkin P.A. Letters on Current Events. M., 1918.

Bolshevism will ruin *the cause of social construction*, it will open wide the door to reaction, unless all the socialist parties, from the so-called right to the extreme left, including also the ideological Bolsheviks and anarchists, unite to find practical ways of restructuring society on new principles.

Are we enemies? Irreconcilable enemies?

But what separates us?

Principles? Beliefs? Tactics?

Shouldn't we finally realise that the all-destructive war, now in its fourth year, has fundamentally changed the economic, legal and ethical relations between the different social strata, so that it cannot but affect the ideology of the workers' movement, the theoretical values of socialism and its tactics.

If all the socialist parties — and the parties which have been at the helm of power, no less than the others — are helplessly floundering in the arena of rapidly unfolding history; if, having become masters of the situation after the February revolution, the socialist parties have not yet succeeded in organising systematic social construction, it is not because of their evil will or negligence, but only because of their misunderstanding of the course of history, because of their conservative desire to preserve the old socialist ideology of the pre-war period in the face of radically changed historical conditions.

This very outdated ideology the Bolsheviks directly and blindly put into practice, and in the contradiction between the outmoded theory and the real demands of life, is the whole tragedy of the Bolshevik impulse.

A reassessment of all the theoretical values of socialism has become an urgent necessity in order to lead the country out of the present raging elements of history into the harbour of peaceful socialist development.

“*The present war is making a new history.* It sets new conditions of social construction for all peoples,” Kropotkin predicted at the very beginning of the world war.¹

The point is to understand what these *new conditions of social construction* are. *If we understood them*, perhaps socialists of different persuasions would merge into one united family, into a close alliance of workers in the socialist field.

And the first and most *basic condition* for unification is the rejection of the apparatus of power, this outmoded empirical technique for influencing social development.

The time has come to trust in the basic *renewal* principle of Narodnikism — to trust in the spontaneity of the masses, in their creative initiative.

This creativity is not an abstraction, not an abstract speculation, not a distant utopia: it springs from all the fissures caused by the world war to the fractured social relations.

Food associations, house and factory committees, the pervasive co-operative principle, the flourishing of trade unions and the possibility of reviving the self-defence of the country — a self-defence now recognized by all — the revival of the army under the leadership of a technical professional union of officers and the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies themselves, called by life to harmonize the activities and professional interests of all the working strata of the population outside — and in spite of — the authorities; all these factors of real social construction on new principles would have acquired a powerful flowering and would have lifted the country out of the state of moral madness, if it had not been for *the vile poison of power over the people* penetrating everywhere, to use the energetic words of Maxim Gorky.

¹ Kropotkin P.A. Letters on Current Events. Moscow: Zadruga, 1918.

tors in the evolution of the biological world, but because it proved for the first time by detailed, concrete scientific observations the *changeability of species*, which had hitherto been considered constant in a series of successive generations — in other words, Darwin scientifically substantiated the theory of evolution.

The hypothesis of class struggle, however, had no scientific research of the kind of Darwin’s. Later studies, however, the labours of De Lanessan and chiefly those of Kropotkin, established the predominant role of the factor of *association for struggle*, both in the evolution of species and in the development of societies, an association whose role Darwin himself had not overlooked. In the structure of societies, indeed, the subdivision into classes, or rather into professional associations, is seen, and there is often a struggle between equal professional strata, but to a much greater extent there is a commonwealth or mutual assistance of different strata of the population united in one more or less extensive society, or state, for self-defence against external hostile intrusions into the independent life and development of the country.

The whole history of mankind is a continuous panorama of such struggles between different countries. The most striking example of a persistent, stubborn association of classes for aggressive and defensive struggle is represented by the present gigantic and prolonged war.

Here it is not the interests of two hostile classes, capitalists and proletarians, but the interests of whole countries which have united all the strata of their population by the commonality of benefits.

Germany, a country newer in terms of the powerful development of its capitalist production, having picked up allies, started a struggle to subdue the older capitalist countries to its economic hegemony and met with a friendly, insufficiently foreseen response from almost the whole rest of the world. The German working people are materially interested in the outcome of this struggle, on a par with their ruling classes; that is why they

the people laid down their arms before a ruthless external enemy organised into a strong military state and, like the Christians of the first centuries of our era, having lost the instinct of self-preservation, stood helplessly before the conqueror, expecting a miracle from the international solidarity of the proletariat for their salvation.

So deep is this belief in international class solidarity in the intellectuals who hold it, and so blind is it in the masses of the people who have accepted it, that they do not notice that if this factor had been the essential engine of civilisation in our era of widespread enlightenment in Western Europe and America, the war itself could not have arisen, much less lasted so long. Obviously, other laws govern the destinies of mankind.

What is the reason for the fallacy of the ideology of the International, which has put its stamp on the modern socialist and anarchist movement, and where is the scientific path to the realisation of the ideal of social justice? These questions will be answered: the first by a historical review of the origin of the theoretical premises of the International and the second by an account of the latest development of anarchist thought.

The time when the theoretical foundations of the International were being developed coincided with the appearance of Darwin's scientific work *On the Origin of Species*, which immediately gained enormous popularity, took a firm place in science and captured the minds of his contemporaries

By analogy and consonance with one of the guiding ideas underlying Darwin's scientific research, namely, the role of the struggle for existence in the process of species change, the hypothesis of *class struggle* also acquired a halo of scientificity.

First of all, it should be noted that Darwin's theory is great not because it gave the struggle for existence the role of *one* of the fac-

The Old and New in Anarchism

In recent times, when in Russia the radical parties have seized power and thus found themselves in the centre, the general public has become particularly interested in the "party to the left of the Bolsheviks". This interest did not arise without reason. The ideas of anarchism penetrated further and further into the working movement in Russia; they were eagerly accepted by the remnants of the army and navy, and many people called them "the successors of the Bolsheviks"; in the eyes of the working masses, anarchism had acquired, one might say, "the right of citizenship", since it was striving for an even higher social justice than that promised to them by Bolshevism.

A marvellous impulse for integral justice possesses at present the minds of the masses! Anarchism is indeed capable of carrying these popular masses after its high ideals, if only the anarchists themselves were at the height of their historical vocation.

But so far, some anarchists have done everything to alienate all ideological people with their pragmatic proclamations, and the rest of them, who preserve the purity of the ethical principles of their doctrine, are unfortunately not very active.

In any case, every citizen should familiarise himself with anarchism, if not in order to fully grasp the indisputable truth that this doctrine carries, then at least in order to understand his future opponent in the practical social field.

What is the essence of anarchism?

It is difficult to answer this question exhaustively, since anarchism does not represent a complete scientific doctrine or a separate philosophical world-view.

What characterises anarchism, what is common to all anarchists, whatever their starting point and way of thinking, is *the rejection of authority*, the denial of the *right* of people to *forcibly* subjugate other people, even if the power comes from a numerical majority.

Diderot formulated this thought in the following words: “Nature has created neither masters nor servants; I want neither to make nor to receive laws”.

This is the only common, indisputable position recognised by all anarchists. In everything else, opinions may differ. But what is of interest to the reader is not abstract discussions, but the origin and ideology of the *international anarchist labour movement*, since at present only the latter is of practical importance.

The ideology of the anarchist movement, like the ideology of social democracy, arose out of the theoretical principles underlying the first international, the International Workers’ Association, founded in London in 1864.

The International that emerged at that time set itself the goal of economic liberation of workers from the exploitation of capital *by the hands of the workers themselves*. In order to achieve this practical goal, the International threw out its fighting slogans: *class struggle and the international unification of wage labourers* (proletariat).

But when it was necessary to move from words to deeds, the International encountered a major obstacle: the resistance of the *governmental authorities*.

On the question of the attitude to power, the International split into two currents: some – the future Social Democrats – proposed to seize power in order to crush the capitalist class at the moment of victory by the so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat”; others – from whose midst the modern anarchist movement arose – found, that with the victory over power, capitalism would be defeated and disarmed, and therefore it was necessary to endeavour to abolish power entirely, as a dangerous weapon of class oppression, and in which socialism, as a harmonious order without class contradictions, would have no need even at the moment of its triumph.

Here, in brief, is the ideological essence of the international socialist movement and its two main branches: statist (social-democratic) and anarchist.

fanaticism dormant in every ignorant man. And the darkest times of religious persecution were resurrected.....

Capitalism as a system of production, which had already been upset under the Provisional Government, was destroyed; the basis of this system – private property – was actually abolished, but the ordinary workers were unprepared, unable to cope with the complex apparatus of production, and again went in search of an enemy – the elusive bourgeoisie.

After diligent search they finally found more enemies in their own ranks. The proletarians of different categories of labour turned against each other: the labourer turned against the craftsman, the two together against the workers of scientific and technical knowledge; one part of the workers of mental labour turned against another part and a struggle between them ensued; then decomposition swept over the workers of mental labour, the craftsmen and the ordinary workers of the same profession and they began to openly preach and widely apply strikebreaking. Thus was dealt a fatal blow to the other basis of the International – the theory of the *mass association* of all workers of wage labour – the proletariat.

Then they led the workers to seek the “class enemy” in the provinces. Blood and destruction spilled over the whole country to the glory of the theory of the ruling parties of the socialist-statesmen.

In the heat of internecine war, driven by the phantom of the class struggle, the people did not realise that the only undoubted enemy, both internal and external, sowing discord and preventing their internal and international unification, was *state power*.

Wearied by the brutal long war and *lulled* by another dogma of the new faith, the *international unification of the proletariat*,

These theoretical considerations would be of limited practical interest if the parties, which have assimilated the principles of the International, had not acquired a great influence on the very course of history and had not carried out the *theory of class struggle* with the persistence, lack of criticism and even fanaticism of religious beliefs.

Class struggle is the frozen dogma of the faith of all socialists and even of many anarchists. The terrible consequences of the widespread dissemination and application of this scientifically untenable theory in the ignorant masses of the Russian people, we have seen and experienced since the February Revolution, especially after the triumph of the direct heirs of the International — the Social-Democrats (Bolsheviks), in close contact (*for the first time in history*) with their co-heirs — the anarchists.

After the October coup d'état, which became so bloody thanks to the exaltation instilled by this theory, the "bourgeois" began to be searched for. But the search was in vain. The crimes of capitalism were in plain sight, but the criminal himself was elusive. It turned out that the bourgeoisie, *as a class of people*, had been absorbed into the middle, and even partly into the lower strata of the population. It was possible to point to some individual rich people, but even those have long since disappeared...

They continued to look for the bourgeoisie, and in Moscow they found it in the person of Osip Minor, who had grown old because of his struggle for socialism in prisons and penal servitude, and his comrades in the party, in the person of the revolutionary officers and that part of the student youth which had rallied round the party of the Socialist-Revolutionaries, while the other part had joined the Bolsheviks.

And nightmarish events took place, fraternal blood was shed on both sides in glorification of the new dogma of the faith of the ignorant people — *the class struggle*. This dogma awakened the spirit of

This ideology has permeated the whole socialist movement from the end of the sixties to the present day.

The International meant to unite only the wage labourers, mainly the *industrial proletariat*. Capitalism, developing more and more, was to displace the individual craftsmen and small workshops, it was to spread to agriculture: as a result of the full flowering of capitalism, both industrial and agricultural, the intermediate classes would disappear, the possession of the instruments of labour would be concentrated in the few hands of a separate class of capitalists and thus facilitate *their* transfer to the collective possession of the workers themselves. In this way, the exploitation of labour would be ended.

This ideology of the First International permeated the whole anarchist labour movement and a part of the anarchists (the Russian syndicalists) still stand entirely on this ideological platform.

But for 50 years and more, since the establishment of the First International, life has not stopped; anarchist thought has not frozen. The further development of science and life, especially the experience of the last war and the Russian revolutions, has revealed the defects of the theoretical premises of socialism and, in connection with this, the ideology of anarchism is changing.

The main factor in the concentration of capital was hitherto considered to be the technique of machine production.

The steam engine centralised the technique of production, it united the hired workers in factories and plants, mechanical production cheapened the cost of the manufactured products and competition mercilessly ruined small-scale industry, which used manual labour. According to this scheme the further development of capitalist production was to follow until its completion in socialism.

But in the course of time a new propulsive force has appeared which had not yet been applied to production at the time of the birth of the International. This force is electricity. It has rapidly gained an equal place alongside steam, and is even endeavouring to acquire a predominant position over it.

The new propulsive force, unlike steam, is easily divided and carried at a distance from its source of origin. What steam has united, electricity builds up to crush.

Then, with further refinement of machinery, a new and peculiar type of engine came into existence, the internal combustion engine, less cumbersome than the steam engine and more portable than the electric engine.

Strong and free, the new engines are already flying in flocks above the clouds, submissive and obedient to the will of the brave human pilot.

They are also travelling everywhere on the ground, without rails, carrying goods and people.

Tomorrow they will plough, sow and reap on every strip of land.

In many branches of production and even in agriculture, the fragmented improved engine has suspended the further centralisation of industry and seeks even to *decentralise* it. Kropotkin has long ago pointed out and studied this new phase of the development of production,² but socialists of all schools, and even anarchists, do not sufficiently appreciate the tremendous change which the new direction of development of the machinery of production is bringing about in the ideology of economic development which they have inherited from the old International.

The other theoretical premise in the programme of the International, of the concentration of capital in an increasingly limited

² See Khleb i Volya, ch. "Decentralisation of Industry", and Letters on Current Events.

number of hands, with the separation of society into two distinct classes – on the one hand, the holders of capital, the bourgeoisie; and on the other, the proletariat united in its interests – did not pan out.

The extraordinary flourishing of the various joint-stock companies and partnerships in the last fifty years has made it possible for the small capitalist to unite with others in competition, often *without separating himself from productive labour*, in order to keep pace with the development of the technique of production without losing his property rights to his share of the capital invested in the enterprise.

Large capital, by its competition, did not swallow up small capital, but united it. Not only that, but big capital itself began to adopt the same system of stocks and shares, which enabled each individual production or enterprise to expand even further. This, however, did not diminish, but on the contrary, increased the number of co-owners of the enterprise and, at the same time, facilitated their hereditary transfer without prejudice to production and, if direct division was impossible, without selling it to a larger capitalist.

Joint-stock companies and partnerships on shares enabled the small proprietor to retain his productive capital, but they certainly did not prevent the accumulation of more or less large amounts of capital in the same hands. Only the number of large capitalists, compared with the mass of small holders of units and shares, is comparatively insignificant.

On the other hand, the co-operative principle, which is penetrating more and more deeply into the structure of society and spreading more widely, tends to unite the smallest capital, mainly of small savers, in the hands of the small consumers and participants in production themselves.

Thus capital, from the largest to the smallest amounts, are closely woven into the process of production, exchange and distribution of products. The class of capitalists is diffused throughout society and it is not possible to single it out into a separate class.