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A Reminiscence of Alexander Berkman

Carl Nold

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Much has been said, from diverse quarters, regarding Alexander Berkman and his deed, yet he himself, for obvious reasons, has not been heard. In the following I venture to give his sentiments concerning his action, as he gave them to me in the first year of our prison life.

For several days succeeding Berkman's arrest, he, Berkman, remained in ignorance concerning the physical condition of Frick. When it transpired that Frick would recover, it seemed to him that this circumstance, purely accidental as it was, would not tend to produce any minimizing effect on the significance and importance of his act, for a deed, such as his, that is its meaning, does in no way depend upon the physical consequences, but must have for its criterion the purpose underlying the deed, and should be estimated according to the moral effect, called propaganda, produced by such an act. As far as his purpose and aim were concerned, it mattered very little whether the shots were fatal or not; indeed, viewed from the true anarchistic standpoint it did not make the slightest difference what the outcome, the physical results were. Berkman had no per-

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sonal axes to grind, no personal wrongs to avenge, no private feelings to satisfy.

It might popularly be supposed that the object of the attempt was to remove an obnoxious person; yet nothing could be further from the real purpose. It was Berkman's aim, first and last, to express by his deed his sentiments towards the existing system of legal oppression and industrial despotism; to attack the institution of wageslavery in the person of one of its most prominent representatives; to give it a blow—rather morally than physically—this was the real purpose and signification of his act.

The Anarchists are misrepresented, libelled, caricatured and—very little understood. They are represented as arch enemies of society, murderers, and lunatics. But did it ever occur to the believing public to inquire why the enemies of society should, of their own free will, subject themselves to all the inconveniences and dangers arising from unfavorable public sentiments; why they should willfully and willingly risk their liberty and enjoyment of life and even sacrifice their very lives as they often do in pursuance of—what—?

Insane fancies, utopias, phantasmagoria?

Is it lunacy to wish to make the world better? Insane fancy to work and hope for a more just and rational condition of affairs? Is it utopian to desire freedom and the enjoyment of life for every human being? Are Socialists and Anarchists enemies of Society because they think the world could be improved upon and every man, woman and child made free and happy?

It this is lunacy and a sign of enmity towards society, then Anarchists are indeed criminal lunatics.

But is it?

The History of Darkness records the names of men whose "genius" devastated whole countries, ruined its people and caused the death of thousands upon thousands of human beings, in order to demonstrate their imaginary right to a disputed claim of a hole in the ground somewhere in Asia; it

immortalizes the names and records of men who waged war upon their neighbors because they were weak or strong; it tells us of other men who unsparingly sacrificed human life while trying to convince the world that one is three and three is one; or that bread is flesh and wine is blood, and many, other disputed questions of “equal importance”.

The History of Light, on the other hand, tells us of men whose life’s sole ambition was to make the world better, to dissipate the shadows of ignorance and disseminate the seeds of knowledge, to raise the curtain of darkness and let the beautiful rays of light carry its vivifying warmth into the human heart. They were men of genius and they, too, waged war; war against darkness and despotism, against ignorance and slavery. And when human life was sacrificed in these wars, it was only out of necessity, to insure the happiness of the many at the cost of the few. And because humanity was dearer to these men than their princes, because they thought more of the people, their rights and liberties, than of the strength of the throne, they were persecuted and punished. They were proclaimed enemies of the nation, traitors to their country and its interests, murderers and brigands and were treated accordingly—until they had gathered strength enough to come out of the struggle as victors. With success came recognition and now the names of the lunatics of 1793 and of the traitors of 1776 are held in sacred memory, and the men that had fallen under the hoofs of tyranny are regarded as martyrs to humanity.

And who shall say that the lunatics and social enemies of our day will not, in time, be successful and prove themselves pioneers of light and freedom?

But you say it is lunacy to revolutionize the world by an individual revolutionary deed. So it is; and what is more, no revolutionist of modern times—be he Anarchist, Socialist or Nihilist—ever expected the reconstruction of society to follow upon the heels of his deed.

It is by means of a primary intellectual revolution, to lake place in the heads of the masses, that the Radicals of modern times hope to bring about a change in the social, political and economical status quo. The propagandists by deed are at the same time agitators by word. They believe in, and work for the education and enlightenment of the masses, which means they regard as the surest and absolutely necessary qualification for the social revolution.

A revolutionary deed has for its purpose either the removal—by forcible means—of a tyrant, a dangerous spy and so forth, with or without the intent of making at the same time by means of the deed, propaganda for the ideas of the advanced movement or the forcible direction of public attention to certain social conditions that have become rotten, senseless, unbearable and a veritable source of evil and misery. This holds true in the cases of almost all revolutionary deeds of the last 25 years as could be easily demonstrated in every instance.

Thus Berkman's views concerning propaganda were, at the time of the Homestead trouble, precise and radical. Though the ideas of Anarchy have for years been propagated in this country, the native born population still remained indifferent; thought he, why? Because, first, they entertain perverted views as to Anarchism, and, second, because they do not earnestly believe in our sincerity of purpose and solidarity with the working classes. The American is of a practical turn of mind, he puts little faith in phrases; to convince him, solid facts are necessary, "In the beginning was the deed." If we wish that the American workman should listen to our words, we must primarily demonstrate to him by deed that we mean well with him, that we are his friends. We must prove to him that our sympathy for and interest in him is not a mere empty sound, but that his cause is also our cause and that we do not stand idly by, indifferent to his misery and struggles, but that we feel, suffer and fight with him, for him. To demonstrate this and thus win the

sympathy, the heart and ear of the American workman, there is no better way, or rather there is no other way, than to sacrifice our own blood, our very life on the altar of his liberation.

Thus reasoned Berkman and more: Such a demonstration should not be given on the boards of political life, for the American believes himself to be a political sovereign—the demonstration should be given in the industrial arena where he feels that there is something wrong, something that he could not as yet alter with the ballot. Berkman meant it well, his sincerity cannot be doubted. He was but too willing to sacrifice his liberty, even his life for the benefit of the cause, to hasten the social revolution, to serve as the dead timber under the feet of humanity, marching onward.

The Homestead Lockout appeared to him to offer the long expected opportunity of translating his ideas from theory into practice. The rest is known. Five years have passed. In the Western Penitentiary of Pennsylvania in a cell 4x7 feet is a young man in solitary confinement. With a few books and papers and an occasional look at a small piece of the sky which he can see from his cell, he muses over the past five years of imprisonment and over the seventeen yet to come. He was willing to aid the cause of Labor, now the time has come for Labor to come to his aid.