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April 1926

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This article is a comment on an article by Max Nettlau. Max Nettlau (1865–1944) is an Austrian anarchist historian.

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In his recent article Nettlau states that the reason, or at least one of the reasons why, after so many years of propaganda, struggle and sacrifices, Anarchism has still not managed to attract the great mass of the people and inspire them to revolt, lies in the fact that the anarchists of the two schools of communism and individualism have each set out their own economic theory as the only solution to the social problem and have not, as a result, succeeded in persuading people that their ideas can be realised.

I really believe that the essential reason for our lack of success is that given the present environment — given, that is, the material and moral conditions of the mass of the workers and those who, though not workers producing goods are victims of the same social structure — our propaganda can only have limited scope, and none whatsoever in some wretched areas and among those strata of the population that live in the greatest physical and moral misery. And I believe that only when the situation changes and becomes more favourable to us (something which could happen particularly in revolutionary times and through our own efforts) will our ideas

win over an increasing number of people and increase the possibility of our putting them into practice. The division between communists and individualists has little to do with it, since this really only interests those who already are anarchists, and the small minority of potential anarchists.

But it nevertheless is true that the polemics between individualists and communists have often absorbed much of our energy. They have prevented, even when it was possible, the development of a frank and fraternal collaboration between all anarchists and have held at bay many who, had we been united, would have been attracted by our passion for liberty. Nettlau therefore does well to preach harmony and to show that for real freedom, that is Anarchy, to exist, there has to be the possibility of choice, and that everyone can arrange their lives to suit themselves, whether on communist or individualist lines, or some mixture of both.

But Nettlau is mistaken, in my view, to believe that the differences among anarchists who call themselves communists, and those calling themselves individualists is really based on the idea that each has of economic life (production and distribution) in an anarchist society. After all, these are questions that concern a far distant future; and if it is true that the ideal, the ultimate goal, is the beacon that guides or should guide the conduct of men and women, it is even more true that what, more than anything else, determines agreement and disagreement is not what we want to do tomorrow, but what we do and want to do today. In general we get on better and have more interest in getting on with fellow-travellers who make the same journey as us but with a different destination in mind, than we do with those who, though they say they want to go to the same place as us, take an opposite road! Thus it has happened that anarchists of various tendencies, despite basically wanting the same thing, find themselves, in their daily lives and in their propaganda, in fierce opposition to one another.

anarchists to the unions; disagreements on the autonomous organisation or non-organisation of anarchists; permanent or occasional disagreements on the relations between the anarchists and other subversive groupings.

It is on these and similar problems we need to come to some understanding; or if, as it appears, agreement is not possible, then we need to know how to tolerate one another. Work together when there is consensus and when there is not, allow each other to act as they think best, without interfering.

After all, when one thinks about it, no-one can be sure of being right, and no-one is always right.

comes outright enmity between those who, as Nettlau says, are so close to one another, motivated by the same passions and ideals?

As I mentioned earlier, differences as to the plans and theories regarding the future economic organisation of society are not the real reason for this persistent division, which is, rather, created and maintained by more important, and above all, more topical dissent on moral and political issues.

I do not speak of those who describe themselves as anarchist individualists only to show their ferociously bourgeois instincts when they proclaim their contempt for humanity, their insensibility to the sufferings of others and their longing for dominion. Nor do I speak of those who call themselves communist anarchist, but are basically authoritarian, and believe they are in possession of the absolute truth and award themselves the right to impose it on the rest of us.

Communists and individualists have often made the mistake of welcoming and recognising as comrades those who share with them only some common vocabulary or external appearance.

I mean to speak of those I consider the real anarchists. These are divided on many points of genuine and topical importance and can be classed as communists or individualists, generally out of habit, without the issues that really divide them having anything to do with questions concerning the future society.

Among the anarchists there are the revolutionaries, who believe that the violence that upholds the present order must be defeated by violence in order to create an environment which allows the free development of individuals and collectivities; and there are the educationalists, who believe that social change can only come about by first changing individuals through education and propaganda. There are the partisans of non-resistance or passive resistance, who shrink from violence even where it serves to repel violence, and there are those who admit to the necessity for violence but who are in turn divided as to the nature, scope and boundaries of legitimate violence. There are disagreements over the attitude of

Given the fundamental principle of anarchism — namely, that no-one should have the desire or the means to oppress others and force others to work for them — it is clear that Anarchism involves all and only those forms of life that respect liberty and recognise that every person has an equal right to enjoy the good things of nature and the products of their own activity.

It is uncontested by anarchists that the real, concrete being, the being who has consciousness and feels, enjoys and suffers, is the individual and that Society, far from being superior to the individual, is that individual's instrument and slave; must be no more than the union of associated men and women for the greater good of all. And from this point of view it could be said that we are all individualists.

But to be anarchists it is not enough to want the emancipation of the individual alone. We must also want the emancipation of all. It is not enough to rebel against oppression. We must refuse to be oppressors. We need to understand the bonds of solidarity, natural or desired which link humanity, to love our fellow beings, suffer from others' misfortune, not feel happy if one is aware of the unhappiness of others. And this is not a question of economic assets, but of feelings or, as it is theoretically called, a question of ethics.

Given such principles and such feelings which, despite differences of language, are common to all anarchists, it is a questions of finding those solutions to the practical problems of life that most respect liberty and best satisfy our feelings of love and solidarity.

Those anarchists who call themselves communists (and I am among them) are communist not because they want to impose their specific way of seeing or believe that it is the only means of salvation, but because they are convinced, and will remain so unless there is evidence to the contrary, that the more men and women, united in comradeship, and the closer their cooperation on behalf of all, the greater will be the well-being and the freedom that everybody will enjoy. They believe that even where people

are freed from human oppression they remain exposed to the hostile forces of nature, which they cannot overcome on their own, but that with the cooperation of others, they can control and transform into the means of their well-being. The individual who wished to supply his own material needs by working alone would be the slave ofhis labours. A peasant, for instance, who wanted to cultivate a piece of ground all alone, would be renouncing all the advantages of cooperation and condemning himself to a wretched life: no rest, no travel, no study, no contacts with the outside world … and he would not always be able to appease his hunger.

It is grotesque to think that some anarchists, in spite of calling themselves and being communists, want to live as it were in a convent, submitting themselves to a common regime of uniform meals, clothes, etc. But it would be just as absurd to think they sought to do what they wanted without reference to the needs of others, the rights of all to equal freedom. Everyone knows, for instance, that Kropotkin, one of the most passionate and eloquent propagators of the communist view, was at the same time a great apostle of individual independence, with a passionate desire for everyone to be able to freely develop and satisfy their own artistic tastes, devote themselves to scientific research, find a means of harmoniously uniting manual and intellectual labour so that human beings could become so in the most elevated sense of the word.

Moreover, the communists (the anarchist ones) believe that because of natural differences in fertility, health and location of the soil it would be impossible to ensure that every individual enjoyed equal working conditions. But at the same time they are aware of the immense difficulties involved in putting into practice, without a long period of free development, the universal, voluntary communism which they believe to be the supreme ideal of humanity, emancipated and brought together in comradeship. They have therefore come to a conclusion that could be summed up with this formula: The greater the possibility of communism, the greater the

possibility of individualism; in other words, the greatest solidarity to enjoy the greatest liberty.

On the other hand, individualism (the anarchist variety) is a reaction against authoritarian communism — the first concept in history to have presented itself to the human mind in the form of a rational and just society, influencing to a greater or lesser extent all utopias and attempts at setting them up in practice — a reaction, I repeat, against authoritarian communism which, in the name of equality, obstructs and almost destroys the human personality. The individualists give the greatest importance to an abstract concept of freedom and fail to take into account, or dwell on the fact that real, concrete freedom is the outcome of solidarity and voluntary cooperation. It would be unjust to believe the individualists seek to deprive themselves of the benefits of cooperation and condemn themselves to an impossible isolation. They certainly believe that to work in isolation is fruitless and that an individual, to ensure a living as a human being and to materially and morally enjoy all the benefits of civilisation, must either exploit — directly or indirectly — the labour of others and wax fat on the misery of the workers, or associate with his fellows and share with them the pains and the joys of life. And since, being anarchists, they cannot allow the exploitation of one by another, they must necessarily agree that to be free and live as human beings they have to accept some degree and form of voluntary communism.

In the economic field, therefore, which is where the split between communists and individualists apparently lies, conciliation should rapidly be brought about by common struggle for the conditions of true liberty and then by leaving it to experience to resolve the practical problems of life. Discussions, studies, theories, even conflicts between different tendencies, would then all be grist to the mill as we prepare ourselves for our future tasks.

But why then, if on the economic question the differences are more apparent than real, and in any case are easily overcome, is there this eternal dissension, this hostility which sometimes be-