

What is Anarchism?

Freedom Press

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To the Editor of "Freedom."

Dear Comrade,-A number of the members of the Socialist League here, are greatly interested in the discussion that bag recently appeared in Commonweal concerning the difference between the principles of Anarchist Communism and those of unqualified Communism or Socialism. We have long been anxious to understand clearly and definitively what that difference is.

The statement of principles contained in the two letters of William Morris (May 18 and August 17) appears to us to fully embrace all the communism and liberty that is needful and indeed possible among men. Knowing, however, that there are many brave and highly gifted men who call themselves Anarchist Communists in distinction to those who like the members of the Socialist League call themselves simply Communists or Socialists; and knowing that Freedom is published chiefly with the view of making the distinction of principle between them manifest, I have been asked to put the following queries to you so that we may better understand each other:

1. How, say in England, would Anarchists seek to supplant the existing state of society? Would they wait till they had converted all the people, or a majority only, or merely an effective minority; and if before all were converted, how would they propose to deal with the unconverted majority or minority who refused to submit?

2. Is not the voluntary submission of a minority to a majority, or a majority to a minority for the sake of the common weal, really a refined or disguised method of yielding to authority or compulsion? If for example, I were to feel constrained voluntarily to do or to refrain from doing anything in an Anarchist community for the sake of the common good or to prevent disorder; would I not be acting from the same impulse as a Social Democrat who for a similar reason yielded to the authority of the State: and would not the difference between us really be one-not of principle, but merely of the form of effecting the same end? I do not believe that a system of State Socialism or State Communism is what we should seek to establish, not because it is necessarily opposed to freedom, but because it is the most cumbrous form of association for the common weal, and one not calculated to secure the greatest amount of personal freedom. Absolute freedom, however, I believe, with comrade Morris, to be impossible among men; men in society can be no more absolutely socially free than the brain, heart and lungs, or the corpuscles of the blood can be absolutely physically free in the living body.

3. May not a number of men consistent with Anarchist principles voluntarily elect or commission some one man to direct them in an undertaking with power to say who shall do this

and who shall do that? and if so, may not a commune or nation in a similar way voluntarily commission one man or a number of men to direct certain communal OF national affairs for a given period; and would the power thus voluntarily delegated by the people, become oppressive when exercised?

Let me say that I do not believe a wise people would care to delegate their power in this way more than was felt to be really necessary; on the other hand, I fail to see how any form of association that prevented the people from delegating their power, or prevented them from voluntarily limiting their individual inclinations or caprices, could in any sense be esteemed a form of association in which there was any real, not to say absolute, freedom.

I trust, comrade. we may exchange. a few words in a friendly discussion upon the above and maybe other points. There is no "ion, I think, for any ill-nature to arise between Communist Anarchists and Socialists in the meantime-and I trust there never will be. I can say for myself and for many members of the Socialist League here, that we would not hesitate to declare ourselves Communist Anarchists if we. felt convinced that Communist Anarchism as distinct from Communism was a better and a possible ideal.

-Yours fraternally, J. Bruce Glasier 250 Crown Street, Glasgow, Aug. 16, 1889.

We are glad to receive the above letter from our Glasgow comrade, and we hope it will lead to the clearing up of some of the points of difference between the Communists of the Socialists League, who have no political ideal, and the Anarchist Communists whose political ideal is clearly defined as opposed to that of the Social Democrats, also clearly defined. We have endeavored in the following replies to confine ourselves as closely as possible to the queries put in our comrade's letter, and we hope he will not hesitate to let us have further questions calculated to clear away the mist from before our eyes.

1. Anarchists do not seek to impose their will upon others, so that there would be no question of their dealing with art unconverted majority or minority who refused to submit. They recognize that there are and have been great inequalities in the mental development of man, due of course to the vicious social systems which have prevailed and fostered inequality, and they see that a Galileo or a Bruno may be right in his views although the whole world is against him. Therefore they do not believe in rule of any kind, either majority or minority rule. They do not wish to rule and they do not wish to be ruled. But they mean to resist tyranny and robbery whenever they are able to do so and to persuade others to do the same. Coercion in their view is always unjustifiable, even if the end in view in the opinion of the coercers is good. The Social Revolution is with them the emancipation of the workers from the burdens and tyrannies of to-day. Every worker they hold should revolt against oppression and robbery on his own account whenever he has the power, and numbers of workers should freely band themselves together for the same purpose. The Social Revolution is inevitable. All the forces of society at the present moment are undoubtedly moving towards gigantic social changes, viz., the expropriation of the possessing classes and the destruction of authority, which the Anarchists are doing their best to make clear to the people. The Anarchist workers at the first opportunity will endeavor to organize themselves in free associations, and those who do not care to participate in the freedom and happiness of the people may continue to support the idlers who now live upon their labor, if they choose. Anarchists are in no way concerned as to whether a majority or minority is in favor of such and such a thing. What they think about is whether the force over against them is stronger than the force on their side and how they are to hold their own against a stronger force, which is by no means necessarily a majority.

2. We all of us have to submit to coercion at the present time, just in the same way as an unarmed man has to submit to the ruffian who holds a pistol at his head, but that is not voluntary submission. When a majority in a certain community decide upon a certain course which is not of the first importance, and the help of the minority is necessary, the minority may voluntarily acquiesce for the sake of the common weal, but that cannot be called yielding to authority. If you were to voluntarily refrain from doing anything which would injure the community you would not be acting from the same impulse as a man who refrained because of the law. You would be using your reason, the State Socialist would not. He would not distinguish between bad laws and good (?) obeying the former and disobeying the latter-he would obey all alike because it was the law. For example, if a majority of the people of London were to say there shall be no meetings in Trafalgar Square, a consistent State Socialist would bow to the will of the majority, whereas the Anarchist would refuse to recognize the decision of the majority. He would use his reason, and if that told him he was injuring no one by meeting in the Square, he would hold his meeting in the Square if he was strong enough to do so.

Your remarks on absolute freedom are not to the point. No Anarchist has ever suggested that absolute freedom in the sense in which you define it is possible. Men must obey natural laws in their relation to each other as well as in relation to matter, but artificial law., (man made laws, Acts of Parliament) are seldom if ever in accord with natural laws, and that is where the difficulty comes in.

3. Certainly a number of men may choose some man or a body of men to direct them in some definite undertaking, on the understanding that no coercive authority is exercised over them, and yet consistently support the Anarchist Principle, but in most cases the common end in view is quite sufficient in our opinion to ensure the best result. For instance foremen are necessary now because every worker instinctively feels that he is being robbed, and is certainly overworked, and therefore has not his heart in his work. He must be overlooked and directed and kept to his task. The foreman is rather a driver than a helper. In a workshop conducted on Anarchist principles the work would be -divided up by mutual agreement and a driver would be unnecessary. "any particular work was too difficult for the man who had undertaken it to do, he might ask his bench-mate just as to-day he might ask his foreman about it. The present writer was once employed in a Socialist printing office where the work was conducted pretty well on these lines. There was certainly no foreman in the ordinary sense of the word. There was a manager who had to attend to the outside business, to purchase paper, etc., to make and receive payments, etc., but that was a part of his share of the work. His interference with the workers was practically nil. They arranged among themselves -hat each one should do and with the best results for all concerned.

As to the oppression of a central body them can be, no doubt about that. The central body, however advanced in views its members may be when elected tends to become conservative. They taste the forbidden fruit, power, and their taste for it grows upon them to the injury of their fellows. Take the case of any one of our trade unions and you will find that the main body are out of touch with the executive. Besides a free combination does not want a center to secure common united action; its center is where the greatest activity is. If it needs to delegate anyone to do certain work it can do so, but it cannot give any individual or number of individuals power to undertake the general direction of others without interfering with the general freedom and the efficiency of the combination.

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