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Review: Constructive Anarchism

The debate on the Platform

Kevin Doyle

1997

This pamphlet from Monty Miller Press in Australia gathers together some of the early documents that emerged in the anarchist movement in response to the publication in 1926 of *The Organisation Platform Of The Libertarian Communists*. The Platform, as it was to become known, was written and produced in Paris by the *Dielo Truda* (Workers' Cause) Group, among whose members were Nester Makhno, Ida Mett and Peter Arshinoff. Makhno, Arshinoff and Mett were by that time in exile in Paris from the repression and persecution that had followed the Bolsheviks' rise to power in Russia. All had fought and participated in the Russian Revolution.

Though written with this in mind, the Platform did not seek to address the specific problems experienced in Russia. Rather it concerned itself in the main with the realities of the then existing anarchist movement. The opening paragraph described its predicament as follows:

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“It’s very significant that in spite of the strength and incontestably positive character of libertarian ideas...and...the heroism and innumerable sacrifices borne by the anarchists in the struggle for libertarian communism, the anarchist movement remains weak despite everything, and has appeared very often in the history of working class struggles as a small event, an episode, and not an important factor.”

It went on, in the next paragraph, to pointedly state:

“This contradiction ...has its explanation in a number of causes, of which the most important... is the absence of organisational principles and practices in the... movement.”

As the other documents in this pamphlet show The Platform became, almost immediately, a subject for debate. Though written by persons who, undoubtedly, had the best interests of the movement at heart, it nevertheless became an object of scorn and was attacked. Maximoff, another Russian exile and author of the longest (and most long-winded) reply to the Platform (included in this Monty Miller edition), was careful to use words such as ‘childish’ and ‘primitive’ in his descriptions of the arguments made by the Platformists. In doing this he hardly served his cause well, and his contribution, to my mind, is by far the weakest, and of little value even now. The other two main ‘views’ (also included here) are that of Malatesta, the Italian anarchist (then imprisoned by Mussolini), and that of another grouping of Russian exiles among whom was Voline. Though both Malatesta and this group did oppose the main thrust of The Platform, they did so in a well-intentioned and informative way.

So what were the issues that The Platform raised, and why were they so contentious?

Though the Platform was written with a practical agenda in mind, it is concerned throughout with questions of a theoretical nature, and with the implications of these. These theoretical questions have either not been addressed adequately in the anarchist movement in the past or they have not been addressed at all. One of the key questions is this: If, as anarchists, we are primarily concerned with achieving a free socialist society, then how can we proceed towards achieving this aim without abandoning our libertarian character? Since organisation is indispensable to achieve any real results, how do we preserve libertarian politics in an organisation and at the same time move forward?

Such a question is far from mute. And the question, moreover, is of importance not just to anarchists but to all libertarian socialists. Revolution raises special problems for libertarians as opposed to authoritarian socialists, a point that has become plainly obvious with the defeat of the two key revolutions of this century: Russia and Spain.

The Platformists were committed anarchists. As such they were concerned with an issue that almost always comes to the fore in any revolutionary situation. This is the relationship between the revolutionary minority and the mass of people. Firstly is such a distinction valid i.e. between the revolutionary minority and the large mass of people? The Platformists say yes. How is the relationship to be described? Would it be possible to ignore it? If not what is important in it, relative to the overall aim of a revolution: freedom?

There are other questions too: What ideas do people take into a revolution with them? Does everyone overnight become spontaneously anti-authoritarian or must a struggle 'to win hearts and minds' take place even within a fully fledged revolution? How should anarchists deal with profoundly authoritarian ideas that also appear to be revolutionary (Leninism)? Should it ignore such ideas? Should it confront them? If anarchists confront them, is that

method of action in itself authoritarian, and counterproductive to the spirit of the revolution?

These questions are crucial issues of revolution, according to the Platformists — and they are right of course. The issue of preserving the libertarian character of revolution while at the same time putting in place a new means for economic and social administration is the main problem not yet solved in any revolution, this century or any other. Mass movements constantly throw up forms of grass-roots democracy that could indeed be the basis for a new society: the Factory Committees in Russia, the collectives in Spain, etc. Yet, time and again, these forms of revolutionary organisation have been overrun before their existence has been consolidated and extended.

Perhaps because of their experience in Russia, the Platformists were unashamedly pro-anarchist. One of their key conclusions (in the Platform) goes as follows:

“More than any other concept, anarchism should become the leading concept of revolution, for it is only on the theoretical base of anarchism that the social revolution can succeed in the complete emancipation of labour”.

The basis for this claim, that was in effect to become a key contention of the Platform, is that anarchist ideas articulate crucial aspects of revolutionary method: in terms of advocating self-management, in terms of linking means and ends, and in terms of advocating participatory or grass-roots democracy. For these reasons, the Platformists argued, anarchist ideas are the most advanced ideas of revolutions (or to put it another way the practical tools necessary to win revolution). This claim — by no means trivial — earned the Platformists the ignominy of being described as ‘Bolsheviks’, or ‘bolshevised-anarchists’ — slurs without parallel in the anarchist movement (it must be said).

The Platformists, it has to be said, would probably have agreed.

How is this central assertion of the Platformists — that “anarchism should become the leading concept of revolution” — to be judged? Is it un-anarchist? Is it arrogant? Is it a recipe for authoritarianism? Though Malatesta, Voline and others accepted that the Platformists were ‘sincere’ in their polemic and, to a point, honest about the state of the anarchist movement, they nevertheless saw in this claim of the Platform’s an attempt to ‘lead the masses’. This remains a central issue in the dispute — even today.

It is rarely said — except by the obtuse — that the Platformists were consciously authoritarian; such a reading of their efforts cannot, in any case, be borne out. What is more usually claimed however is that the Platformists were ‘enamoured with’ or perhaps ‘unduly affected’ by authoritarian notions — perhaps because of their ‘close encounter’ with Bolshevism during the Russian Revolution. We cannot know for sure — not now anyway. However, what we can know — or, at least, can still discover — is what was at issue in the debate in the past. This is illuminating to say the least! Today, in some quarters, the Platformists are often dismissed as ‘want-to-be leaders’. Yet this was not where Malatesta took issue — he accepted that anarchists should take the lead. The question, as Malatesta saw it, was not whether to lead, but rather how you should lead — a fairly important distinction in the argument. Malatesta posed two ‘alternatives’: Either we “provide leadership by counsel and example leaving people themselves to... quite freely adopt our methods and solutions...” or we “can also lead by taking command, that is, by becoming the government...” He asked the Platformists, “In which manner do you wish to lead?”

Despite many efforts and many letters on the subject (in particular between Malatesta and Makhno) this question could not be clarified to either side’s satisfaction, in part because there was an additional issue for dispute — this was the issue of organisation principles (which in themselves make up a significant part of the original Platform document). In his letter of reply to Makhno, Malatesta stated (Document 3):

“...it is clear that to attain their ends the anarchist organisations must, in their constitution and operation, be in harmony with the principles of anarchism, that is, they must in no way be polluted by authoritarianism..”

A statement that was in effect to become the nub of the debate: did the organisational form that the Platformists propose contradict basic anarchist ideas?

The Platformists were without any doubt intensely focused in their objectives, and it was this as much as any experience in Russia that was to mark out their proposals about actual organisation. As they saw it, The General Union Of Anarchists – the title they chose for their organisation – should be a collective body of anarchists in spirit as well as in operation; the GUA should clearly distinguish between collective activity and individual acts of rebellion (indeed it should have no part in the latter, they argued); and it should seek to operate efficiently and democratically. In single-mindedly adopting this framework the Platformists – in effect – rejected the notion that efficiency, democracy, and a unity of theory and practice were un-anarchist ideas and incompatible with anarchist organisation. They said: we can be efficient and effective, and we can be libertarian, at the same time – there is no contradiction. The debate, oddly enough, still rages.

There is a final matter that is not touched on in this Rebel Worker publication, though it is, of course, central: this is Spain. Written ten years before the events of the Spanish Revolution, the Platform appears on first reading to be contradicted by what was to occur there. Indeed the Platform’s opening description about the ‘state of the anarchist movement’ appears in sharp contrast to the mass movement that was then emerging in Spain, and that was to flower in ’36. Moreover the ‘mass’ nature of the Spanish anarchist movement and its broad basis in the working-class seem if anything to be the antithesis of what the Platformists were arguing was the

norm. How are we to view the Platform against the example of Spain?

As the Monty Miller Press Introduction points out, there were certain aspects of the Russian anarchist movement that marked the Platform, in terms of its overall prognosis. Anarcho-syndicalism which had only shallow roots in the Russian working-class was already by 1926 deeply embedded in Spain. Anarcho-syndicalism was, by virtue of its membership, organisationally driven and clear in terms of its objectives. It succeeded because of this. However if wrong in an important way about Spain, the Platform was right in a crucial way. The eventual outcome of the revolution of ’36 clearly brought home the very deficiencies the Platform had underlined: make anarchism the leading ideas of the revolution or lose. It was a choice the CNT-FAI could not make in the end.

The importance of the Platform as a document of revolutionary anarchism has become lost in invective over the years. It is a poor reward that we have for Makhno, Archinoff and Mett! Monty Miller Press are to be commended for this re-issue, but also for including the various replies and letters that followed on its heels. The debate is important still, and lest we forget why, consider, on this the anniversary of 1937 – the year of defeat for the Spanish Revolution – the conclusion of Jose Perriats, the anarchist historian aligned with the CNT. In *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution* he says:

“Anarchism is largely responsible for its own bad reputation in the world. It did not consider the thorny problem of means and ends. In their writing, many anarchists conceived of a miraculous solution to the problems of revolution. We fell easily into this trap in Spain. We believed that once the dog is dead, the rabies is over. We proclaimed a full-blown revolution without worrying about the many complex problems that revolution brings with it”