

On the Issue of “Revision”

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On the Issue of “Revision”¹

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It's only the one admitting to being defeated who is defeated.
(Old Proverb)

Lately, we are seeing a revision of our views — a “reassessment of values” — across the board. This is a completely natural, even inevitable, pursuit: our worldview is not a rigid dogma; it must develop and transform as life goes on, and we have to be responsive to its lessons. Besides, the Russian revolution is such an important historical event offering us so much experience that it would be entirely impossible not to derive anything from it and content ourselves instead with a simple repetition of what was said ten years ago.

So, the first question that arises: does the experience of the Russian revolution confirm or refute our main ideas? We are anarchists not (or not only) because we find the anarchist ideal attractive, but because we believe that it is along this path that humanity will be most successful in moving toward free and equal communal life; for us, anarchist society is not something that only exists as an abstract thought, but rather a real social order, a real goal of social activity. That is why the facts of reality are extremely important for us.

Had the experience of the Russian revolution shown that state-building, centralization, and dictatorship were successful in putting economic equality into practice, ensured free cultural development to everybody, and allowed everyone to develop their spiritual faculties, we would not have hesitated to admit to our mistake and to extend our hand to statist socialists in order to work together. Similarly, had anarchist activities developed in the course of the Russian revolution to an extent sufficient to offer some experience of positive construction by anarchist methods, those of free agreement and bottom-up organization, and had that experience shown the inadequacy of these methods, we would have admitted to that and started searching for other methods and programs.

And what about now? We haven't seen either of those outcomes. The anarchists have had no chance to launch their program, while the statist building methods have gone bankrupt so obviously that nobody can deny it. “War communism” or, as Lenin put it more precisely, “state capitalism,” has had to make every possible concession to the bourgeoisie, since it refused to accept the methods of free socialism.²

Under these circumstances, the main principles of our worldview not only prove to be far from inconsistent in the face of these events, but draw new strength from them. In the course of our revaluation, or revision, these principles stay out of question, along with everything that is inseparably connected with them, arises from them, and cannot be detached from them. The “revision” may only have a single objective: make *new* conclusions from the events and consecrate *new* phenomena based on these main principles, find answers to *new* questions, and develop, based on the experience, practical *programs* that could not be outlined before. We are closer to real achievements now than we were before, and this imposes on us certain obligations.

¹ Ed: Korn, M. “К Вопросу о ‘Пересмотре’ [On the Issue of Revision].” *Дело Труды/Dielo Trouda* [The Cause of Labor], November 1925.

² Ed: Lenin proclaimed the need for state capitalism as a “step toward socialism” in an address to the Session of the All-Russia C.E.C. on April 29, 1918 (Lenin, “Session of the All-Russia C.E.C.”).

However, in our circle, a peculiar attitude has developed. Some comrades dwell on the idea that a revolution is a complicated, difficult, long business requiring sacrifice, associated with war, famine and various disasters. They saw it in the past, foresee it in the future, and make a rather unexpected conclusion: that our programmatic views are inconsistent! As if those views were to blame for everything Russia has suffered! Seemingly, the more complicated the task we face, the stronger we have to adhere to the paths we believe to be right, the more we have to the more we have to grip tighter our arms. Yet some comrades, in view of expected difficulties, begin a “revision” of anarchism that deprives it of any strength to fight these future dangers and brings to nought its historical role.

It’s either one thing or the other: either a person believes that anarchism is on the right path with regard to community building and is more able to fight against our opponents than any other system, or they believe that anarchism is inappropriate for this — but then, what right do they have to call themselves anarchists?

In these discussions, two questions come to the fore above all: that of the classes and that of the transitional period.

What is the anarchist attitude towards class struggle? In this general form, the question gives rise to a lot of misunderstandings, especially due to the reign of Marxist terminology.

On one hand, class struggle is a fact; on the other hand, it is the object of theoretical reflections. As a fact, it is only denied by those who do not see or are not willing to see the opposition of the interests of labor and capital — of the bourgeois and the workers who still see their masters as their benefactors. No socialist would refuse to acknowledge the fact of class struggle and to consider the struggle necessary. Nor, consequently, is there such an anarchist.

However, if we proceed from this basic notion common to all socialists, it will turn out that not all socialists have the same views of *how* the classes group and *which of them* must logically fight each other. In Russia, the early socialism by Chernyshevsky and the Narodniks fought mainly for the interests of the working peasants against their exploiters — the landowners, the rich peasants, and the State.³ Later, Russian Social Democrats set their exclusive goal as struggle of the newly formed urban proletariat against the bourgeoisie, shoving the peasants aside and declaring them the petty-bourgeois element — contrary, by the way, to Marx himself who was closer to the Narodniks⁴ in this regard. In other countries, some socialists tended to appeal not only to the proletariat but to small owners, as well — peasants, independent craftsmen, etc.; others rejected all except the wage workers. Some considered the working intelligentsia to be a part of the proletariat, others were implacable in designating them as part of the bourgeoisie, etc. In a word, the question of what classes, beside the proletariat, socialism can deal with remains as open as it was before. One does not have to search for far-off examples: it is enough to look at the daily wavering the Bolsheviks show with regard to whom they should draw on.

What is the anarchists’ stance in these disputes? In this regard, there has always been a radical difference between the anarchists and the Marxists. To determine what social classes and

³ Ed: Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828 – 1889) was one of the founding theorists of Narodism, a form of Russian socialism focused on liberating peasants from exploiter classes in favor of communal ownership. Chernyshevsky, as well as fellow theorists like Peter Lavrov, further believed in the role of the intelligentsia to help lead the peasants toward these ends. (Pipes, “Narodnichestvo”). Of note, Marie Goldsmith’s parents Isidor and Sophie were both Narodniks and were close with Lavrov.

⁴ With regard to Marx’s attitude to this controversial issue, see the extremely interesting article by [Vladimir Mikhailovich] Zenzinov, “The Lost Scroll” in *Sovremennye Zapiski (Contemporary Writings)*, No. 24.

categories they fight for, the anarchists bring to the forefront the question of who is oppressed and exploited in the given society. For them, liberation of the working class as a class is *the primary condition of liberation of all of humanity*. For the Marxists, the class they cast their lot with is determined by a purely economic criterion: the class whose share in distribution of the public product is salary, i.e., the proletariat. As for the Marxists supporting this class's interests, they do so because they are convinced that it is time for the proletariat to replace the bourgeoisie. Marx, however, expresses the idea that the victory of the proletariat marks elimination of all classes, but practical Marxists tend to sideline this consideration, and thus reduce liberation of all of humanity to the replacement of one class with another.

Those of our comrades who are going to blur our *universal humanist* points of view over as if to the benefit of the *revolution* are deeply mistaken. If there were a contradiction between the interests of the *revolution* and the interests of *humanity*, it would mean that the revolution is not necessary or is harmful – and we would not be revolutionaries. Similarly, if there were a contradiction between the interests of the proletariat and those of *the human person* (like the one that exists between the interests of the individual and the interests of the capitalist class), we would not protect the working class. But the point is that, in every historical epoch, the oppressed part of society aspiring for liberation was at the same time the proponent of *universal humanist* ideals since it was forging a path to a better future and increasing the amount of freedom in humanity. That is why, if anybody ever represents a method of struggle harmful to the individual as a method of serving the interest of the proletariat, we will be able to say without any hesitation that that is a mistake, and the tactic suggested will be in the first place harmful to the proletariat itself. This is what happened to the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” A group of people acting on behalf of the working class legitimizes economic inequality, creates a politically privileged social stratum, suppresses public initiative, eliminates the liberty of thought, etc. The working class is thus deprived of any initiative, any possibility of using the fruits of their revolution for their social and spiritual development, and of building their lives on their own.

And what is the class question on “the next day” after the revolution? On the face of it, why even speak of this: if the classes have not yet been eliminated, then the revolution has not achieved its goal and “the next day” has not yet come. If it has come, then all of the concerns of this variety consist of preventing social categories from swapping places: that is, yesterday's paupers becoming people of wealth and vice versa. *Such* a result is easy to obtain but is worth nothing. It may satisfy the feeling of vengeance for a minute, but it has no social importance. On the contrary, it is necessary to take every effort possible to ensure that the victorious day of the revolution puts an end to all privileged categories. In the basic matter of material needs, there is a means to do so: *our communism*. Some comrades today have a somewhat dismissive attitude towards our principle of “to each according to their needs” as if it implies untold riches. No, no matter how poor society is, it has always an opportunity to distribute fairly what little it has, and “fairly” means *according to need*. Any other measure of distribution will give rise to acute conflicts and enmity, and will further complicate the already difficult situation by undermining social solidarity *necessary* in difficult moments. New wine shouldn't be poured into old skins, and new life must be based on a new principle. Only then will strength and enthusiasm arise that will be able to overcome the obstacles; mechanical violence will yield nothing.

Next to economic privileges stand political privileges. The anarchists, by their very nature, are “politicians,” as they place the question of the State at the same level with that of economic reorganization. And the question of the State is not about class: the State is associated with one

or another class so far as it protects that class's interests; but it may protect the interests and privileges of category rather than of a class (such as the interests of the nobility in an estates system and those of the clergy in a theocratic one), of a nation, even of a single ruling party. And struggle against the State as an institution *in general*, not against its specific form, is not done to protect any particular class. Similarly, the sum total of moral principles included in anarchism does not fit into the class framework. Anarchism is a class doctrine since class struggle is present in all forms of socialism, but anarchism adds many other things, just as valuable, to it.

In this political sphere, at a revolutionary moment, the anarchists mainly have to fight the formation of the *non-class* State power, the power of a social democratic (no matter Bolshevik or Menshevik) *party* looking forward to reigning over society where everybody is the State's hired servant and all are equal in their dependence on the State. The anarchists rebel against this dictatorship not in the name of class interests, but in the name of trampled human rights. Yet, their goal is certainly not limited to opposition against that State power: their task is defending and implementing a transfer of all functions of the State into the hands of voluntary public organizations. The State will only be eliminated when it is stripped of all its socially useful functions. It will vanish as unnecessary, since nobody will defend it if it is left only with its policing function.

The first step along this path is syndicalism, i.e., transferring all industrial enterprises, transport, etc. into the hands of trade unions and factory committees. Then, the organization of distribution follows; it is carried out by cooperatives or other appropriate associations; the housing problem is resolved by committees elected by all the residents of a city, etc. In a word, a number of organizations must be created, each having its highly specialized powers and none exceeding the scope of its powers. The anarchists will have to work on the creation of such organizations in every sphere of life, and later, to work in these organizations, as far as their individual skills and capabilities permit. Sure, that is non-partisan work, but one should bear in mind that the success of that work, the ability of the new free institutions to rise to the occasion, will decide the fate of the revolution itself.

And a few more words on the issue of power. Some Russian comrades display a viewpoint, a completely new one in our movement, which consists in a calm, moreover, conciliatory, attitude towards constraint of freedom: freedom of thought, opinion, associations. In the name of struggle against the counter-revolution, they start admitting that "we," too, should use the force of power to defeat the enemy. And it is not the case of an armed enemy one must defend from, it's an enemy fighting in the sphere of ideas: by means of speech, publications, party activities. The main truth of anarchism — that force may only be used against an oppressive force, that thought and peaceful activity may not be subject to any constraint — is discarded for the sake of "practicability," as if Russian experience has not shown a thousand times what brilliant results these notorious practicability-based methods bring! It's not worth elaborating on this, or we shall be reiterating fundamental truths that every anarchist can find in any booklet taken from our literature.

The second question taking an important place in our "revision" is that of the so-called "transitional" period. Much is associated with this issue, even more than the notion itself implies. We will now look into it.

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On the Issue of Revision — Transitional Period (Ending)⁵

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There is a lot of talk now about the impossibility of implementing the anarchist system soon after the revolution, about the necessity of a long transitional period, etc., and they insist that should we acknowledge this point everything will run like clockwork; and should we not — catastrophe will follow. What, in fact, is there to be afraid of? One can say for sure that the anarchist ideal in its entirety will not be implemented anywhere on the next day after the *first attempt* at a social revolution, that certain experience and a certain period of revolutionary social development will be required for that. The anarchists have never denied this; they have always had in mind a transitional period when speaking of the necessity to leave some transformations to life itself and not to resort — once the soil has already been cleared of the old oppression — to forcible imposition of new practices.

Let's take, for instance, the question of small peasant property. The anarchists will never agree that a peasant who works the land by themselves, *by their own labor*, be stripped of this land, and the land be forcibly transferred to collective ownership; they will expect that communalization of the land will take place as a result of the comprehensive development of the spirit of free association and owing to the example offered by prosperous agricultural communities. There will certainly be a lot of vestiges of the past in the new society, in economic relations, in organizational forms, and in the phenomena of spiritual life. Thus, for example, trade unions and public associations (cooperatives, labor exchanges and the like) took over the management of production and product distribution; but some of them stand for application of the communist principle "to each according to their needs," while others do not dare to part with the old form of labor remuneration and product payment. Of course, the anarchists will fight these vestiges of the past, but not by means of force. They will use ideology, mainly, the force of *examples*: their main task will be showing that an activity based on *their* principles will not stand to lose and, moreover, will be more successful. That is why in the circumstances of that new life where *free organizational experiments are possible* the kind of work we now call "cultural" fuses and conflates with revolutionary work, and every cultural conquest achieved by anarchist methods will directly serve the implementation of the anarchist social system.

The same applies to the other spheres: in organization of the school, where the anarchists must proclaim the complete freedom to teach and of institute any kind of school; in the sphere of religion where any violence would be extremely contrary to the anarchist spirit; and where the only choice is to leave everything to the natural influence of the environment and to the achievements of intellectual development.

⁵ Ed: Korn, M. "К Вопросу о Пересмотре — Переходный Период (Окончание) [On the Issue of Revision — Transitional Period (Ending)]." *Дело Труда/Dielo Trouda* [*The Cause of Labor*], January 1926.

However, accepting the relics of the past as a necessary evil and fighting them ideologically is one thing; elevating these relics to the status of an inevitable developmental stage and regarding this stage as the immediate objective of our activity — while temporarily setting aside “impracticable” slogans — is quite another. In doing so, we forget one more point: the best way to make our slogans truly impracticable is to stop proclaiming them.

The existence of vestiges of the past is a necessary evil, but *it is not the thing* one must adapt to when developing programs, because any such adaptation will make this evil stronger and more viable. No prediction to the effect of *at what moment* and *which part of* our ideal will come true will change anything in this state of affairs. At *every* moment, our program may only be based on *our* communism and *our* political ideal, and afterward life itself will show us what is impracticable at any given moment. Some allow for a longer period before the anarchist system is implemented in full, others predict a shorter time. Regardless, if some are more optimistic and believe the implementation is possible immediately after the revolution, why fight this? Where is the danger? In excessive faith? That has never seemed to harm any cause. That faith moves mountains is not merely a phrase, same as the notion that at a critical moment (war, revolution) the victory is often a result of something that an impassive mind sees as impossible. It seems we are afraid of enthusiasts, but aren't they the ones who drive progress — not only in society, but in science, in art — everywhere?

There is a lot of talk of the Bolsheviks' pragmatism, skills, organization, etc.; they may well have all these faculties, but it is not owing to them that they left the social mark on the Russian revolution only a few of the other active parties aspired to leave in 1917. Soon after the October Revolution, Lenin happened to say that he did not expect practical implementation of lawmaking, that it was enough for him to throw slogans at the masses in that manner. And he was absolutely right: the decrees could not have any practical value (life is not built like that), but the principles proclaimed stuck in the mind and paved a way for the future. There are two techniques in social activities: setting a broad goal in anticipation that the broader it is, the greater part of what is expected will come true, and setting goals pre-acknowledged as attainable, to secure the achievement. The anarchists have initially chosen the first way and discarded all the minimum programs. The second way was that of social democratic parties. Now it has been suggested that we set a goal of “more practicable” requirements of a transitional period; we recollect early disputes about minimum programs. But if back then, in peacetime, we did not consider those programs desirable or appropriate, why should we renounce our birthright now, after the revolution? The transitional period was underway yesterday, still is today; what it will become tomorrow depends on what people of conviction, people who believe in their cause, make of it.

These are the main points of the revision taking place among our ranks. They do not add anything new to anarchism, do not develop or improve it in light of new facts, but, on the contrary, take a lot away. In short, anarchism is deprived of its *soul*. Indeed, by denying the principle “to each according to their needs,” one knocks its economic foundation, its communism, out of it, reduces it *exclusively* to class struggle, strips it of its philosophical worldview limiting it to purely economic struggle, and blurs its anti-statist nature; by suggesting that we fight for a transitional period, one takes away maximalism and introduces a minimum program. And then — shall I mention the shame everyone of us must feel at the thought that sometimes we may justify political repression of our ideological opponents, even if they are downright counter-revolutionaries? And all that is done for the sake of practicability, feasibility, for the good of the

revolution! What does such “anarchism” amount to? A word void of any meaning — or, rather, a word with quite a foreign meaning.

Sure, everyone has the right to acknowledge their mistakes, to change their opinion; but, on finding one’s earlier ideas inconsistent, it would be better and more logical not to smuggle into one’s earlier worldview something that doesn’t fit with it at all. Some new movement may emerge among our Russian comrades, but judging by what is shaping up, that movement will not be anarchism. And, without any doubt, it will be accompanied by the old, sound, and consistent anarchism that will, as before, attract minds and spirit.

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