

1907 and the Present Outlook

Max Nettlau

1908

The year 1907, rich in congresses, acquainted us with very many details of the recent history of the Anarchist, Socialist and Labor movements which I had but very limited opportunities to examine; still, I shall try to gather from what I know the main points of the present situation and tendencies of all these, movements, to see what is being done, and what is, in my opinion, left to do.

We notice first *the utter failure of political Socialism*. The Socialist vote grows quicker than do Socialist, ideas; hence all the millions of Socialist and Labour votes carry no real strength with them, and political power turns out to be something finer organised and more complicated to yield at the mere pressure of the ballot. The bourgeois vote has at its back the determination of all voters to have a Government, of whatever party it may be, that will defend Capitalism against Socialism; whilst the Labour vote has as yet at its back but a few real Socialists and infinite numbers of half-hearted persons to whom Socialism is worth casting a vote for every few years, but to whom it is not worth any other serious effort in everyday life. Hence Governments either ignore the Socialist vote, as they do in Germany, where Social Democrats have the strongest voting power of all parties; or they use these Socialist and Labour Members as inoffensive parts of their Radical majorities, and pay them with Governmental benevolence of various kinds, and some of their chiefs with, seats in the Cabinet—witness Millerand, Briand, Viviani, and the Right Honourable John Burns. To remain absolutely powerless with millions of votes at their back, or to be permitted to desert their ideas, to become, the accomplices of the most brutal bourgeois Governments—these are the only issues of political Socialism, the conquest of political power, which theorists once established as the first step towards Socialism. The oldest and the youngest Parliaments are alike in this, as Russia showed, where Duma after Duma was dissolved because voting power is infinitely different from fighting power. One may as well believe in repelling a bandit's attack with a voting paper in preference to a pistol, as in checking capitalism, enjoying possession of all wealth and power, by the paper weapon of Parliamentary censure. Political Socialism is, however, inevitable, as ambitious politicians will always seek advancement in this way, coming to the top by means of the Labour vote and then reaping the profits for themselves; but as this is being done always more cynically and in a business way, larger numbers *may* be expected to see through this game by and by; and in any case, Socialist governmentalism is being discredited by its own action under our eyes, which lesson may save us yet from having to pass through the experiment of a State Socialist society.

Another fallacy which modern developments tend to expose is that of a *centralised State*, so dear to orthodox Socialists. Their own electioneering ambition puts them on the right way in this case by discovering the spheres of municipal and local action. It is true they have also given us the useful object-lesson that Governments or authoritarian administrative bodies can be equally wrong, be their sphere of power the largest or the smallest. Still, local life has been revived, to some extent even at the hands of these friends of centralisation, and it will never go to rest again; on the contrary, the State, which interferes with it in so many ways, will have to go. Things in this domain go our way, but Anarchists would not waste time in helping a little in place of letting things drift. By this I mean the support of all that may make local life independent of the State, but also a check on all newly arising localised governmentalism.

It is unmistakable that all classes of workers have become conscious of the obvious fact that the life of society ceases if they stop from work. The idea of *economic action*, of the *General Strike*, is ripe everywhere; the face of the earth might be changed by it in a moment if the producers only wished it; all wealth becomes a heap of decaying materials if nobody will work on them; all power vanishes if there is nobody to obey it. It is evident that this cannot be achieved at one stroke; hence the immediate success of general strike movements is of small importance—thousands of efforts must be made to achieve a great thing. The school for such efforts is the syndicalist movement; working experiments are made in the labour of daily-life; *sabotage* is one of them, efforts to create greater solidarity by various means is another one. Governmental crimes are met by rapid general strikes with far greater alacrity than in the old roundabout way of casting a vote for an opponent of the Government at an election some years hence, and then waiting patiently for further developments. Socialist politicians and old-fashioned Trade Unionists feel hopelessly left behind by these new forces.

And yet optimism would be a grave mistake even in this case. It is a large and wonderful step—from the worthless voting paper to the firm expression of the workers' will by the cessation of work; but a more important step remains to be taken—from the merely negative, inert cessation of work to *real revolutionary effort*. This step, e.g., the Russian workers in October, 1905, did not take; so everything went wrong there from that moment, and the splendid advance of revolution in Russia was checked at the same time. The bandit who holds you up will laugh at the voting paper—he will be terrorized for a moment if you hold his hands fast—but if you let go your hold again, he will then attack you with greater fury than before and overthrow you. A general strike is always good as an exercise, but it will be effective only, if some day revolutionary effort will be combined with it to an infinitely larger extent than up till now.

It seems to me that all other parts of Syndicalist work can well take care of themselves; routine work and occasions for strike movements are much more favorable when arising out of sudden events than when carefully prepared beforehand. We may compare here the Italian strikes of solidarity, which break out with lightning rapidity, to the relative failure of the French Eight Hour movement, prepared long ago to begin on the First of May, 1900, a mistake that has since been recognised. What I call “revolutionary effort” can only be prepared in *one* way—by the increase in number and efficiency of revolutionists. Revolutionists cannot be created; propaganda can only awaken the latent energies which slumber in a few; in others they are asleep to such an extent as never to be aroused; in others, again, they will only be aroused on the spur of great events. If men of these qualities can during a general strike overcome the initial difficulties, they may set the ball rolling; otherwise the capitalist system will never be really affected even by general strikes. As no one can know whether such action will be forthcoming some day, or whether

the number of determined men will always remain too small comparatively, it is impossible to consider the general strike as the one and only way that leads from this system to a better state of things. This alone ought to teach us not to spend all our energy on Syndicalism, and that those who are inclined to do so should not spend it on the elementary and routine part of it, but on its most advanced side, among those who explore the unexplored tracts between Syndicalist and revolutionary action. Here all possible help is wanted, and no one can give it but Anarchists, and among them only those of really revolutionary disposition.

The *Antimilitarist* movements are extremely sympathetic, only they are yet in their beginnings, and have an enormous work before them. From the school to the Press, national hatred is diffused through an elaborate network everywhere. Again, authority brutalises the best-meaning young people, who have to become soldiers, and an hour of practical work makes absolute beasts of soldiers and officers—witness the horrors in China, Morocco, etc. Antimilitarist seems not yet decided everywhere on one great point: whether to consider the soldier as a brute or as a victim, whether to combat him or to try to win him over. Here also the real, effect of the propaganda will be felt once, at a sudden moment when the military apparatus, undermined by ceaseless efforts, will collapse. In the meantime so much remains to be done here that the smallest effort is welcome.

Theories, dogmas, are no longer patiently endured; too many people examine them, and their weak points are found out. This happened to *Marxism* when, at last, it was more closely looked at from every point. We may foresee that no other system will ever win even that amount of recognition which Marxism once had—and this, again, is a step in our direction. Only we must not ourselves be burdened with theories and overlook to some extent the difference between hypotheses and principles. I allude to the economic doctrines of Anarchism, of which none shall ever be considered as obligatory or generally applicable. It may be that after experience one economic system may be in more general use than all others; but before this we all long for a period of unlimited free action, to win that experience of which we all must be said now to be deficient. The gates that open into Anarchism should be widened, not narrowed; in fact, to one who is really Anarchist there are no gates at all—he wants and welcomes free experience in all, and does not make a faith of anything beforehand save the necessity of freedom and fair play all round, which is possible only under Anarchy—which, in fact, is nothing but Anarchism itself.

In this connection all sorts of *specialized movements* are a good sign. People no longer wait until a great change puts everything straight; they begin smaller and larger experimental creations here and now, separated as far as possible from the State and the present economic system; they create oases, neutral territories, laboratories for future experience—all of which may be superseded by later developments, but is the best that can be done to-day. Moreover it strengthens the right tendency that each one should work on lines which his own inclination maps out for him.

On the whole, then, we noticed a number of very sympathetic tendencies; but we must not forget one point; our enemies have to a larger degree than ever before corrupted public opinion on their behalf by playing on greed and prejudice of all kinds. Race-hatred was resuscitated, Protection also. Protection extended to labour opens problems on which many, average Labour people—Americans, Australians before all—are not sound. Anything that can possibly debase the working classes in the way of the Press, literature, sport, etc., is equally thrown across the way. All this work of counter-revolution is practiced to perfection under the eyes of the English people, who, when reading of the exploits of the Black Gangs of the Russian Czar, are little aware, as a

rule, that the same Black Gangs are operating against themselves, only under a more cunning disguise.

From all this I conclude that whilst some schemes like the Social Democratic State are already eliminated, future developments in general remain as mysterious as ever. For no one can possibly guess the strength of latent revolutionary energy that will be brought to the surface by coming events. Will it be sufficient to lead to a clean sweeping away of the whole present system, or will by-and-by a greater separation of progressive from reactionary forces arise than exists already, and the next stage be that the progressive forces obtain full elbowroom at the said of the reactionary forces—just as Freethought is existing to-day side by side with the densest religious obtusity? Freethought would have preferred to demolish religion altogether, but had to be content with the success of attracting some of the best and obtaining neutrality from the rest—on its guard always against a treasonous enemy, of course. Will a similar state of things—exemption from the political State and economic independence on a co-operative basis—be the next stage of Anarchism also? Or will it remain in its present state of action by propaganda only? Or will it be able, by bridging over the gulf which still separates Syndicalist from revolutionary action, to establish a new basis—collective property—on which it could be practiced on a larger scale?

I conclude by question; I cannot do otherwise. Hopes are not absent, but the task before us is greater than ever.

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