

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



A General Survey

Max Nettlau

1910

Max Nettlau
A General Survey
1910

Retrieved on 11th May 2023 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Published in *Freedom* 24 no. 249 (January, 1910): 5–7.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

As time goes, by, an increasing number of social commotions of some kind seem to happen each year, periods of rest are hardly known, and it would not be difficult to describe a number of events of a hopeful character tending towards freedom during the year that is just past. The first French postal strike, the anti-militarist revolt in Catalonia, the international Ferrer protest, the crushing of absolutism in Turkey and in Persia are each of them events of a magnitude that has not happened in years in the quiet past. But I do not wish to overlook that, side by side with these, infamous reaction also commits ferocious deeds on a scale hardly imagined before, and defeats of the people often follow ephemeral victories. The gallows reign in Russia, Russia's preparation to crush Finland, the doings of her Cossacks in Persia, all this placidly condoned by the rest of the European States; the repression of the Catalonian revolt by the same soldiers in whose favour the people had stood up, the twelve hundred Montjuich prisoners, the murder of Ferrer and others, the defeat of the second French postal strike, and the failure of Syndicalists to second this movement by a general strike, etc. But these are victories of brute force, it may be said. True, but there are what might be called voluntary defeats of the people—

reactionary tendencies of masses of people whom we used to consider as Socialists at least—that is, as people who had grasped in any case the elements of brotherly and humane feelings. Yet they remain almost silent when one of their best-known spokesmen, recruiting sergeant Robert Blatchford, turns Tory in a way the cynicism of which would make blush even a Maltman Barry of the preceding generation. To-day to “Socialists” everything is permitted to acquire personal well-being and power; they bid everywhere for a share in the spoils of the people, and they are let alone; no one thinks of blaming them, most people seem ready to imitate them. This voluntary renunciation of the respect won for the people by the sacrifices of numberless nameless enthusiasts of the past, is a worse defeat than bloody repression after a fair fight.

Some will consider my impressions as too gloomy; they are, of course, quite personal, and may be contradicted and refuted by others. I will try to give my reasons for them, and can only do so in Freedom, for on slight rejection one cannot fail to note the fact that in this whole world-wide Empire there is not a single paper in existence in which public matters can be discussed with independence except little Freedom; what was once the Socialist Press, in the days of William Morris’s *Commonweal*, has long since become the exclusive organ of party, exactly like the capitalist Press. I will say beforehand that I feel neither disappointed nor hopeless; I have only to blame myself for having entertained too large hopes without a sound basis for them.

Primitive organisms, roughly speaking, resemble each other; higher development brings about differentiation. Early society was easily ruled by a crafty dominating class who made the people accept uniform beliefs and customs. We are still under that spell, and habitually think of the whole of society accepting by persuasion, by example, or by force a now social system that would bring justice and freedom for all. In the past and present uniform systems seem to prevail, feudalism or capitalism, though closer examination shows many remains of earlier stages and germs of new de-

velopments to co-exist with the main system. The question that is urgent now is this: Can and will modern man ever accept again a uniform system of society? He is breaking away from uniformity on all sides at a different rate of progress; education, private life, surroundings differentiate just the best developed and gifted part of mankind; the conservative desire for undisturbed uniformity remains alive in the most backward strata of all classes of population. At this juncture Socialism is proposed; first advocated by out-and-out enthusiasts who expect everybody to see and put in practice that which appears so fair and sensible to their own minds. Propaganda begins, and for some time, tilling the virgin soil; reaping in rich harvests of generous men and rebels, the possibilities of the spread of Socialism by propaganda seem boundless. But the moment inevitably comes when all who are really disposed for Socialism are gathered in and new results become scarce. Here the existing body of Socialists divides; a minority of thorough-going Socialists will continue the old propaganda, some will discover that it took too little heed of freedom, and may examine and accept Anarchism, by and by. The majority, however, will look out for so-called practical means to bring Socialism more to the level of ordinary people, they will attenuate, it, make it fit in with Trade Unionism, municipal administration, Parliamentary Government, religion even. Their dominating spirits will consider themselves the providential leaders of the masses of the people, introducing Socialism from above by installments in the form of laws and taxes, by new organs, of public administration, etc. In short, they reduce Socialism to a number of authoritarian measures automatically imposed by national and local Governments or elective bodies of all sorts, like any other, laws and regulations. This brings about the complete absorption of these Socialists by the existing governmental machinery which grinds the axe of capitalism, and we witness chimeric efforts to make that ancient organism created for repression and exploitation serve the purpose of equality and Justice. With the greatest ease the governmental organism absorbs and as-

simulates ever so many Socialists who willingly fall into its clutches; Burns and Briand, Webb and Blatchford are but a mouthful for this Moloch ; there is room for any number of others, and they are *all* coming, *all, all*—the inevitable fate and end of Parliamentary Socialism.

This has happened to all previous schools of Socialists—after a short period of enthusiasm, an interval of impatience, of a desire to be practical, and then the reckless pandering to the domineering instincts of the leaders, betrayal and extinction of the party—a few honest enthusiasts always excepted. Was there a more brilliant and devoted group than the young Saint-Simonians in the early “thirties,” and how soon they disbanded, to become captains of industry, the first gigantic exploiters in France, making believe all the time to work for the good of the people? The downfall of the later Fourierists is described by G. Ferrari and Proudhon, that of the Blanguists by Vésinier and Vermersch; later on a part of the Blanquists became Boulangists, sympathisers of military dictatorship, whilst other sections of the French Labour movement were not above the suspicion of Napoleonic relations, in the “sixties” chiefly. Marxism kept straight whilst Marx lived, but Engels, like a true Pope, granted absolution for all deviations towards “practical,” anti-revolutionary politics. A barrier of conservative tradition still excludes the German Social Democrats from all accession to political power, but behind the wall which keeps them back their appetites are whetting, and once that wall is broken, when it seems profitable to those in power, there will be a terrific rush for the spoils of office. We see an example of this in Austria, where Social Democrats, since by an extension of the franchise they entered Parliament in huge numbers, are the model party in docility and obedience to Government. And in Hungary just now they are cheering the hardly-veiled efforts to crush Hungarian independence in the clerical interest, because they expect to enter the new Parliament in larger numbers, and will then imitate the *rôle* of their Austrian colleagues, In Italy, again, E. Ferri, the quondam Revolutionist,

the first Anarchists will have already advanced a long way further ahead; at least I hope so, for they would be shriveled mummies; the oldest of fossils, if they had remained stationary waiting for the stragglers to come up. Hence diversity of development will always exist, and the more so as mankind leave the early gregarious state still lingering in so many.

I do not think that this will be the last superstition of which Anarchism has to be cleared, but I think it ought to be the next one. This will give us fresh and immense work to do—to try to be Anarchists ourselves, among ourselves, and to win elbowroom for us, to shape our oasis of freedom amidst the authoritarian desert. I am glad to note that some begin to see this and will act upon it; among others the “Socialisten Bund,” founded by G. Landauer. The moment of the deepest depression of the Socialist movement will also give birth to the real remedy. Or shall we wait till governmental “Socialism” wins further victories, till Burns becomes the hanging Home Secretary, Webb the moral censor of the lives of the poor, Blatchford the instructor in Socialist militarism, Briand the sly strangler of Syndicalism, etc.; there is no mean reactionary task which these and many others will not willingly undertake. We must conclude that some people want nothing better, and go our own way. This would not mean that we should always be isolated; we are isolated as Anarchists only, and ought to recognize that it cannot be otherwise, as the number of people of each particular disposition is limited. But we remain in contact with all progressive causes—with the present defense of Labour by Trade Unionism and Direct Action Syndicalism, with educational and Freethought movements, with anti-militarism, with all movements against State interference, with every effort towards freedom in general. *Voluntary, not compulsory, Anarchism*, in one word, ought to be our aim, and we may yet live to see some of it.

and the other Parliamentary Socialists quarrel as to who had more Ministerial leanings, Since the French party under Jaures, almost shared power with the Combes’ Government, it is ruined in public opinion, and we all see the contempt of the Syndicalists for the Socialist politician. The evolution of Fabianism was described in last month’s Freedom, that of the Labour Party is before everybody’s eyes, that of Robert Blatchford a pen refuses to describe, and so on.

If these remarks could be extended, the unalterable decay of each of the hopeful Socialist movements could be shown in detail. This phenomenon is much too general to be attributed only to personal reasons, to the corruption inseparable from each increase of power and authority. Suppose a number of trees are planted in certain grounds and all die off when they have reached a certain height. One would conclude that the soil is unable to nourish them when they begin to require greater quantities of nutritive elements, than when they were but small. To me, *the decay of all Socialist movements, after reaching the proper limits of their expansion*, can only be explained in a similar way; in my opinion, *the demand for Socialism is limited*, and to try to extend it beyond these limits, to generalise it, is to court failure over and over again.

To explain this, I may further say that, of course, all want to improve their position, and in this sense all would be ready to accept the boons of Socialism if showered upon them from above by benevolent Parliaments and Governments without any effort of their own. But few are those who would willingly take upon themselves the hardships of socialism, the burden of a real struggle for it, and the hard work and personal sacrifice of the first practical efforts in real Socialism. These are too few to impose their will upon society, and the large masses whose efforts are restricted to the occasional casting of a vote, at elections are equally powerless. And so nothing whatever happens, except that Governments and Parliaments occasionally profit by Socialist criticism to patch up the present system, by Labour reforms which would have been inevitable in any case, and by increased taxation which always

finds justification in the eyes of Parliamentary Socialists. The latter fancy they weaken the landlords in England, the capitalists in France, the property-holding classes in Germany by enthusiastically voting land taxes here, income taxes and death duties over there; whilst all the money, whoever hands it to the State, is paid out of the profits made by exploiting the wage-worker in the long run, and it helps but to keep up armaments and a continually-increasing bureaucracy. In short, a formidable mechanism for keeping the people down, in peace or war. "Socialist" arguments have become the most cherished stock-in-trade of all Ministers of Finance; Cailloux, the French income-tax Minister, was the pet of the Collectivists from Juarès to Guesde; "single tax" literature is spread by the English Liberals; Socialist criticism of hereditary property was suddenly recognised by official Germany; there can be no nicer people, then, in the eyes of those who have to gild the pills to make people pay for the tools of their own enslavement, than Socialists of the modern type. And Socialists will consciously or unconsciously play the capitalists' game; there is no way back for them. Fresh Socialist movements will, after a time, begin real propaganda again—only to fail again after some initial success if they do not alter their conception of things from the root.

What, then, should I propose or believe myself? I believe in Socialism for Socialists, as I believe in Anarchism for Anarchists, and in all other systems or standpoints for other people, just such as their natural disposition prompts them to adopt. It is physically impossible that all should reach the same degree of development at the same time; therefore no universal system will ever prevail. If uniformity could apparently be reached in the past when people were, as I said before, more or less equal by an equal degree of ignorance, submission, superstition, etc., it becomes, happily, less possible as we progress, slowly, but a little all the time. It is time for Socialists—for Anarchists in any case, who always precede them—to break away from the superstition that we always must do all the same thing at the same time: This superstition dates back to the

immense fear was the predominant policy of primitive people, being necessary to preserve their lives from the surrounding dangers; we notice it every day in any swarm of sparrows, who all fly away if one of them is alarmed. In our days, Anarchists and Socialists, ought to pick up moral courage to go their own way; they hold advanced ideas, so their place is in the front, whilst to-day, prompted by generous feelings also, to a large degree, they spend most of their efforts at the rear to bring up the most belated victims of the present system—a noble task, no doubt, but not their only one, and one which, if it absorbs almost all their efforts, absolutely brings their own advance to a standstill.

What happens seems to be this. Some of us spend our lives in propaganda, observing all the time that for one who is open to our ideas there are twenty who will not look at them; others fight the system by open revolt, and must become aware that for ten who will join them there are a thousand who will let them be crushed if they are not helping to hunt down the rebels. Generations of propagandists pass away, and if our numbers increase, those of our permanent opponents increase also. Is it a hopeless task then? Not in the least; only that old idea of a primitive past that *all* must accept a unique system must be given up. That idea brought about the religious wars of the past, fought to impose a unique religion, Christianity of some sort. Experience showed that such wars might ruin whole countries, but that their aim, uniformity in religion, could not be achieved; to-day all sects coexist, and their wars are limited to various kinds of unobtrusive propaganda, and Freethinkers have to be left alone. This will and must happen to the Freethinkers of the social movements: the Anarchists and their sun will have risen when others still slumber in darkness. Also for these the daylight will break.

The idea of *all* accepting a given system is necessarily *authoritarian*, and Anarchists ought to be the first to get rid of it. Somebody may object; "But if all voluntarily accept Anarchism, what then?" When the last stragglers will accept Anarchism, I reply,