

On the Divide

The Outgoing Authoritarian and the Incipient Libertarian Age

Max Nettlau

July 4, 1932

The present troubled economic and political situation in all countries universalizes waves of discontent and often of despair, but exercises a differentiating influence upon populations of various countries, as their past history and the happenings since 1914 and 1918 have placed each of them in a different position, exposed them to differing influences and thus produced a different mentality and differing material conditions. Here there is mad despair, elsewhere there is hope. It may even happen that very excellent libertarians of long experience feel like this, as a comrade does writing to me, saying that it does seem to him at times that we are just another religious sect preaching ethics in an unethical world. The love of liberty, he continues, has existed so many centuries, perhaps it will continue in another form, but just now the world is mad, and authority is the dominant idea, and we are dreamers in a cold and ruthless world. So it seems "at times" to one of the best and, no doubt, what present public and social life seems to hold out, may warrant spells of pessimism in some. But I believe that it is just the acuity of the struggle between past and future which dims the vision. We are in the midst of the fiercest *mêlée* between the brute forces of authority and the moral forces of freedom and mostly are so absorbed by the struggle, that we cannot overlook the whole battlefield and observe all the indications which point to freedom's victory. I must say for myself that just the present crisis makes me hopeful as I have not been since my early days, and I shall try to explain my reasons, as I think this is the most important issue before us: overcome with pessimism, our own vitality is reduced; borne up with hopes, our forces are buoyed up and multiplied and *objectively*, I am convinced, the current of evolution runs our way and we must keep in the swim and it will sweep us along to our goal.

For this is the essential point about anarchism: it is identical with the most perfected forms of progress. It is not a system of arranging life; it is life itself, liberated of artificial obstacles. Thus an anarchist house will not be a house built upon some official plan established by anarchist architects, but a house which is not informed by the parsimony of the landlord, by the greed of the builder, by the slovenly work of underpaid workers, by interests of business, advertising, etc., by the bad taste of snobbish tenants and other factors which today are paramount, but it will be the production of disinterested designers and workers who love their work, in agreement with intelligent people will know to give to their house an individual character, whilst not indulging in eccentricities which would make the house distasteful to the neighbors and unwelcome or useless to others who may later wish to inhabit it. Everyone would do his best, exactly as this is

done today even among friends, in families, and even among unknown people on special social occasions, when all feel happy and elated, and as it is done by normally decent people in all their relations with man.

There is absolutely no reason why this increasing comity should not be generalized and why the feeling of solid communion, of common ownership, of disinterestedness and absence of private wishes which animates all who visit a National Museum, a public library, a municipal park, etc. should not be generalized. Do we wish to take the museum pictures, the library scarce books to our own homes? No, we are glad on the contrary that these objects are rescued from private ownership and are now safe at everybody's disposal for all the future. Do we wish to own the houses, the shops, the land we are passing by? We do not think of them at all, the moment we are a little above the starvation line and can beautify our lives just a little.

Those with permanent greed to possess everything themselves, are either absolutely poor and desperate, or they are abnormal persons, suffering from absence of social feelings and they are a minority which the next social move will put out of action, out of the possibility, which they have now, to do harm.

All this, disinterestedness, sociality, considerate behavior are features as well of educated, moral, intelligent, tasteful life and of anarchist conduct, and when people see that all their best aspirations coincide with anarchism, they will be on the road to it and try, and learn how, to remove the obstacles of its full realization.

These obstacles, again, are exactly what most people feel already themselves as obstacles in their way. Who likes the state? Does anybody like the tax-collector? Who has real faith in the politician? Who is not certain that work done quote "by the state," that is ordered for by officials and executed by other officials or contractors, is not, as a rule, costly, inefficient, coercive in its affects? To whom, however educated theoretically to recognize the State, is not the same State in all practical details a nuisance, a busybody, a wasteful incompetence? Or the judges, the police, the military—who is not glad, if he has nothing to do with them, and afraid of the worst, when he falls into their hands? Municipalities are all right in the abstract, but in practice do they not mean bosses and boodle and every variety of waste and corruption? Or consider the capitalists, the bankers, the employers? Even if according to the textbooks of political economy, they are all considered eminently useful citizens, in practice most people are shy now of bankers, they see that the multimillionairism of some capitalists means very little to their own pockets and they all have before them the cruel doings of many companies, capitalist magnates and individual employers. Who, then, but the directly interested themselves, has real sympathy and respect for any existing institution upholding capitalism and the State in its real working, not nominally as an abstract? Very few are so naïve and narrow-minded now; most people see that they are enmeshed in a network which means as little good to them, as the spider's net means to the fly. Which institution has not been as bitterly criticized as ever anarchists could do this, which has not furnished glaring examples of harmfulness or usefulness or incompetency?

This applies to the present situation in every country, large or small. The States knew but to arm, to make war; but could not find in fourteen years the way to disarm, to make real peace. The States understood how to raise new frontiers, how to obstruct trade by new tariff barriers; they do not understand, however urged upon by economists, to remove any of these obstacles. The capitalists understood to order their technical experts to "rationalize" production, and their workers to toil with increased intensity and to increase the bulk of production tremendously; they did not understand to get the States, their own executive organs, not to destroy the markets

by all their evil deeds ever since 1914, nor to disarm and reduce their other ruinous costs, the bureaucracy, nor to drive many countries to the verge of civil war, ruinous to business. Those who control public opinion, politicians, press and the pulpit, educators and men of science and learning—all these did not understand to abolish the war mentality, composed of feelings of fear and vengeance, nor to spread confidence, material goodwill and practical commonsense among men. In one word, every effort to remedy the consequences of a four-years' world orgy of mutual foul murder and vile slander, has failed these fourteen years and the main body of present society, mutilated and weakened by above four years of pure destructiveness, has since then, not been cured, nursed, made convalescent and healed, but has been treated by every sort of quacks, aggravated, inflamed, decayed in such a way that now *a cure on the old lines* is hopeless, the more so, as even *these old lines* cannot be applied: for forces are at work which in reality continue the war, prepare for new outbursts and, logically, such forces stand in the way of healing. Disarmament, the war debts, the tariff walls, the financial interrelations, the national animosities, the selfishness of politicians and the parties, the indifference, prejudice, fanaticism and effective ignorance of the masses—upon all these and other fields of such imminent public and social interest, there is chaos, disunion where the despotic will of the strongest prevails. Gold dictates, existing arrangements dictate, reckless readiness for war dictates, national fanaticism dictates—reason is powerless, human feelings are absent, practical commonsense seems gone—and all but can be achieved in 1932 as in the fourteen years before is to arrive at the most meaningless formula, to shelve matters until another conference after the 34 conferences held in all these years.

This means not only a political and economic, but an intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the system based upon the private monopoly of property combined with the forcible subjection of the people to submission by the state. Both component parts of the system were powerful, when success was with them: adversity now shows their hollowness and practical absence of real power. For what is the State, if not the bureaucracy supposed to run public business with moderate success? If they run the public car in the mud, as they did, there it sticks, like every private car would stick too, and if they cannot pull it out, as manifestly they cannot in all these fourteen years, there is logically bankruptcy which leads to *liquidation* which is exactly the word which the Proudhonists and other anarchists have all along used when speaking of the abolition of the state. It was a utopian dream in the eyes of many then: it is very, very close to reality now. As to property holding, well, such property must find the markets to sell and such markets are diminishing; it must find consumers, to buy, and the ruined and the out-of-work cannot afford to buy: so the halo surrounding property is fading away—an unused factory, railroads and ships with too little freight to carry, are dangerously near to losing their value, as merchandise in overstocked warehouses does, and starved people, hopeless unemployed are likely to develop impatience. Armaments themselves require renewal and this requires new money from taxation or loans and this is not forthcoming with the former alacrity and inexhaustibility just now.

In short, it was possible for many years to prolong the present system by paying old debts with the new loans and never really settling accounts. But somehow confidence is shattered now and the lofty structure collapses and its solid substance is too small to carry the overlarge state bureaucracy, military, the capitalists' and moneylending classes' safe prosperity, besides providing these ugly by-products, depression and unemployment. A sunken balloon, which, in the desert of ruin created by destruction and fourteen wasted years, no one is able to inflate once more.

In this analysis of the present situation I had no occasion to mention socialism. I refer here to the two great varieties of *authoritarian socialism*, to social democracy and to communism (Russian sovietism). What, indeed, have they done? They lacked not of opportunities: the whole of Russia—Siberia with a relatively small effort is being made to submit to bolshevism for almost fifteen years now, and in most of the other European countries the social democrats were admitted to partial or total government since the years preceding even the war, they are considered a safe governmental party and had every chance, in France with Mitterand, Briand and others for above thirty years, in Germany since 1918, in England since the Labour cabinet of 1924, in Sweden, Denmark, etc. Moreover it must be said that Italian fascism is a mixture of State socialism, capitalism and nationalism, organized by an experienced former socialist. In the United States, organized Labour takes the place of socialism, and is not without the means to make itself felt, if it has really something to say. Thus *authoritarian socialism*, a much contested and very undeveloped factor in public life 60, 50, even 40 and 30 years ago, suddenly came very much to the front since 1914, 1917, 1918..., not in every instance by its own strength nor effort, but mostly because the capitalists in all their miserable doings since 1914 wished to share responsibility and guilt with the workers and to some small extent shared even the profits, as the *war* industries paid high wages and *official* careers suddenly became open to the leaders and as nothing was so desirable and welcome to the capitalists, than the continued supply of workers for the war factories, of workers for the barracks and war slaughter houses and of working class' contentment, resignation or patriotic elation by such mental arrangements. Russia was the blot on these schemes which worked so well in the West; also in Germany and in Italy the capitalist intentions were somewhat overstepped.

The result of all this was the present State socialism in Russia which I need not discuss here. It is no attractive form of socialism for Russia, and the attempts to force it upon other countries helped only to reduce and to undermine the social democratic parties, whilst the populations themselves are shy to accept an utterly strange and inefficient system on the sight of its unattractive achievements in present Russia. The social democratic and Labour Party governments have nowhere taken any generous and talented initiative to improve seriously the critical general situation. In fact they had nothing to say and never will say anything, except occasionally in abstract forces at congresses. For all these parties are now but electoral machineries to return the maximum of deputies, which can only be achieved by cajoling the mass of the electorate by reformist and national-patriotic phraseology, not, of course, by presenting socialism and the social problems in their true colors to them.

All this means, indeed, that *authoritarian socialism* is eliminating itself,—in Russia, by its immense selfishness, unsolidarity, cruelty and incompetence, and elsewhere by having become purely a political party, bent upon propping up the *present system—exactly in the years when this system is tottering and crumbling away*—and upon sharing power with the enemies of socialism, the State and Capital. This is done for the purpose of winning both ways—either of gliding into power as the confederate and helpmate of the bourgeoisie, or of pushing into power by a *coup d'état* as the bolshevists did and then to usurp and monopolize State power as they did and still do. No success crowns this treachery to socialism, as the precarious situation of bolshevism after almost fifteen years shows, but it means power in hand, power to come, and that is sufficient inducement for the *new Socialist bureaucracy* ready to supplant the *old Capitalist bureaucracy* or

to merge into it. The workers are the helpless mass of industrial slaves, such as the taxpayers are the helpless paying mass of the capitalist parties. But this close association with the decaying system has infected and senilized the Socialist parties rapidly, fatally: from being, in their opinion at least, a vanguard of socialist progress, they are now the safest props of law and order, the most resigned, self-content, anodyne elements.

They enjoy power; they defend the present system; they have nothing of their own to show even where they are in full power except the present Soviet State where they tyrannize an immense people as tsarism did;—*to what age then do they belong: to the Past or to the Future?* Mussolini restored a middle age; the Bolsheviks rule in tsar-like fashion; the social-democrats and Labour party people bolster up the present capitalist system—what more proofs can be wanted to show that they are all drifting from the hideous Present into a dark Past. Moreover, they make no serious effort to overcome the present crisis. They cannot. They have intellectually and morally abdicated as socialists. Their belief in socialism is gone; they believe in State-enforced arrangements for the social life of the whole of Humanity and grown up Humanity will always scorn such impositions: if Humanity stirs, it will be: *to be free*, and not: *to be despotically ruled by the socialists of this description*, after having been despotically ruled by feudalism, capitalism, and the State.

This can be so manifestly seen this year in Spain, where the authoritarian socialists as ministers and as deputies deport the anarchists and syndicalists, persecute in every way the syndicalist organization (C.N.T.) which is the mainstay of the Spanish workers' present-day resistance in the labor struggle, hopes for tomorrow's change, and the body of idealist anarchist and anarchosyndicalist conceptions. This mass of about a million of workers is treated as the enemy and as the fiend by the official socialists: does anybody, then, expect that *this* such "socialism" will be wanted in a new society? No, it is showing its true color *now*, it is enjoying power *now*, it is wreaking vengeance on the anarchists *now*—it will not be wanted again. Or will the German Noske and others, the Russian Stalin and others, will all these be wanted to rule in a new society? Evidently not: their time has been and still is, now, and after that, it will be over.

These are hard and clear facts which we visualize now every day clearer. If the new society comes about, it will be *libertarian*, this word meaning here the various applications of free or voluntary socialism, such as the many forms of anarchism, voluntary cooperation, also the free forms of syndicalism, if in a free world the present syndicalists will still keep together as the present-day system welded them together for the labour struggle. It is far more likely that they will join anarchist groups by selection and affinity. Or, maybe, the technically useful large units of workers will still call themselves syndicates, whilst they would only be neutral bodies cooperating efficiently and, themselves, individually, grouping themselves as they choose. Having nobody to fight in front of them, the real syndicates would disband, as the units of armies would. Within this sphere, then, the new society would group itself excluding coercion, Statism, authority—and, really, just as today no one would call in a backward, ignorant man to do some delicate, refined work, so there would be no demand for ruling authoritarian socialists in the new society.

Marx and others, up to Lenin, have themselves admitted that anarchism would follow their period of dictatorship. So it will, and *as they are having that dictatorship now*, against the bourgeoisie (Russia) or in league with it (other countries), so their "historical role," to grant them that title, is over now. This must be a disappointment to their adherents who noticed very little, especially little good to them, of this historic event, but their leaders had very much of it.

Marx enjoyed his dictatorship, all his life, since 1844; Engels reveled in it, to his death in 1895. Jaures was the spiritual master of France for years. Bebel, Liebknecht, Dr. Victor Adler, Greulich, Vanderwelde, Millerand, Briand, Ferré, Trotsky, Stalin and all the others, they were indeed the uncrowned kings of the European Proletariat and these dynasties are dying out already: the present generation produced no names which one even might remember. So, really, the ground is free now and those who expect authoritarian socialism to be still before them, are very naïve indeed: they will never see more of it, than what we have seen already and that it quite enough.

Do not let us be misled or discouraged by the present *authoritarian affirmations* in many countries. These are products of the insupportable economic conditions and the impatience with the inefficiency of all in power, the socialists—governing or influential as a large party—included. These populations had too little access to libertarian teaching, even to liberal and radical ideas, as for almost seventy years now the authoritarian socialists did all they could to eradicate these ideas, from liberalism (as Lassalle did) to anarchism. So anarchism always had two bitter enemies: the State and the social democrats, and whilst its adherents boldly stood up against the State, it was not always feasible to make a full stand against the social democrats, as these in earlier years still represented socialism and as socialists were not considered as enemies, whilst *they* always treated the anarchists worse than enemies. So the ground is insufficiently prepared yet (considerable portions of Spain excepted), but the disillusion about authoritarian socialism *has come already*, whichever mistaken forms it often takes with people who know no better. They know *that much* that the social democratic leaders and deputies and ministers will not help or save the people. *It is for the libertarians now to speak to the people*, to explain their ideas much fuller, more broadminded, than they have done up til now, and this in every country and every continent.

Where this new work is seriously begun, as in Spain, it is wonderful to see, how quickly the limitations fall, which in earlier times we have ourselves permitted to be placed upon the anarchist ideas. There were times, when communist anarchists felt it to be necessary, to repudiate individualism, when Malatesta was constantly impugned for being too much of an organisator, when others could only see anarchism exactly as Kropotkin had seen it in the *Conquête du Pain* and in no other form, when toleration was considered to be treason and the presence of two conceptions or more of anarchist life was considered as ruinous or absurd. All these and other particularities were proper to an infantile or bookish age, when programs and pamphlets and some few orators seemed to contain and possess unalterable and infallible doctrines. This period is over now, at least where the comrades are in real touch with the people, as in large parts of Spain now. Here the general ideal is the *comunismo libertario*, and much stress is laid on the necessity to think themselves, to examine the local possibilities, in short the comrades feel that an anarchist conscience, anarchist conduct, anarchist activities are the essential factors, and these must come from everyone according to his own qualities, capacities, rhythm and temper. That is why the “Platform” doctrines fell so flat among the Spanish workers, so many of whom knew them from the beginning (1926) as exiles in France and, with small exceptions, always repudiated them. To the *comunismo libertario* as the immediate aim are joined the *municipio libre*, the free commune as the direct sphere of action and the *inter-solidarity*, as the organization, the National Confederation of Labor foreshadows it, as the method of expanding the local activities and creating the proper basis for adequate production and circulation of the essential commodities. This is, in the history of anarchism, the decisive step from theory to practice, from the study to

the laboratory and to the workshop, from abstract expectations to realities which are preparing themselves now in the heads and minds of many.

If only the libertarians of other countries would speak up also and place their ideal in such concrete forms before the community at large, in which aside of all the desperate authoritarians who look for relief in the past, in greater coercion, in new enslavement, exist cool-headed and liberal elements who have hardly or not at all heard of these present-day aspects of anarchism. They still have the impression that anarchism means the exact reproduction of Kropotkin's personal conceptions, or that by bloody revenge it wishes to inaugurate a reign of terror more truculent than even bolshevism, or that we are but Tolstoian ethical teachers, unfit for these hard times. They ignore that for very many of us this incipient, sectarian period is over, and, of course, if the old teachers of anarchism were living now, they would be the first to see this and take the great step forward. The *situation* is ripe now, States and capitalism being recognized as failures and creating but more losses, the longer they last. The *people* is ripening by the acquisition of the experience that authoritarian socialism is a failure too and can be drain the last resources of the people, if it succeeds to implant itself and to coerce the people to dumb submission. Ripening also by the unmistakable awakening of the popular *will* to bring about changes, the universal *unrest* which nothing can quell now. Socialists are the most conservative portion of the population now, as they have been educated to believe in Marx theoretically, to obey their leaders practically and to expect things from above—if not from Heaven, as the religious believers, at least from the State,—if not from the priests, at least from the social politicians. The non-socialist masses are not domesticated in that way and so they join the communists here, they are fascinated and fooled by nationalists and fascists there—and it is one of the most bitter disappointments that the libertarians do not awake to this real character of the situation and propagate their ideas in modern and direct forms, not as they do so often—by the circuitous route of appealing for interest in the anarchist thinkers of the past—a fascinating study, no doubt, but not sufficiently attractive to the harassed, worried, half-ruined, half-starved, nervous and furious masses of the present time.

Society has really reached now the divide between the old authoritarian methods culminating in religion, privilege, monopoly, the State and Capitalism, and authoritarian socialism, resulting in the practical discredit, ruin and impotence of all these once so powerful and vaunted institutions—and the realization of human freedom, dignity and happiness by the liberal methods which were always the moving spirit of Art, the creator of Science, the motor of the evolution of Ethics, the essence of Progress. Solidarity and generosity are on this liberal side of the divide and with their help the incipient sources and tiny brooks of Freedom will soon join and become swift currents and strong rivers. Authority, so powerful in ages past, is diminishing as the rivulets diminish when we mount up the divide: on the side of the future, the further side of the divide, everything, once begun, gains in force—on the authoritarian side it becomes small and is of no further use, as we turn away from the past as irresistibly as Progress itself—for Freedom and Anarchism *are* Progress, individual and social forms of it, inseparable from it.

We are, in my conviction, much better off, much nearer to our ulterior aims than we imagine and than I imagined myself not so very long ago. Not by our merit, which is small indeed, but by the overwhelming force of Progress, the current which is also our own propelling force. Progress means to proceed from less perfect to more perfect forms, to adapt the Past to the Present, to make the Present prepare the Future. The Future can only be *unselfish happiness* and this is the aim of all good men at all times and is the aim of all anarchists. Authority may have been a swaddling cloth of infancy, it may have been the horny shell protecting the chrysalis, but utterly useless to

the evolved butterfly, it is now like the brown covering leaves of the buds of trees which cover the soil of a forest in spring, when the green foliage has burst them and has unfolded by its own will and power. Spring has come for mankind and therefore all these protective covers have had their time and fall to the ground. So Marxism, social democracy, bolshevism had and have their time, their full fling and now they are dross like the useless organs alluded to.

When coming generations look back to the present time, they will see at a glance, that all this could not happen otherwise. It had to come by itself, by its own inherent energy and will. No one dreams of liberating the buds of their covering sheds: their own energy when *la sève monte* [the sap rises], and the play of the wind, a ray of the sun, some drops of dew or of rain achieve it for a whole world of trees, internationally. The few anarchist groups and papers cannot constitute Anarchism, but awakening Humanity can and will. But we can point out the way and help to clear it; before all we must warn those who get astray now for want of light and take refuge in old authoritarian misconceptions.

We are not “dreamers in a cold and ruthless world,” if we look the present situation straight in the face. The word is red hot with excitement and burning with wrath and indignation at being so fundamentally, cruelly and cynically fooled by all the institutions in which it was educated for ages to put its belief. These institutions now all have their shutters down like so many banks, and working power loses its value in a world of bankrupts and of unemployed. The Future, the near Future will reach the climax, and if there is not to be a stampede towards a primitive scramble of the strongest, universal moral, if not physical, cannibalism, the forward way must be pointed out and chosen—that of solidarity, generosity, freedom which proceeds on convergent lines with that of Anarchism, until both roads merge into one: into the free life of free Humanity.

This is, in my opinion, our present mission: to point out that the authoritarian past has come to such an impasse that it can only be written off as the bad debt of an insolvent debtor, and that the time for the new start on the lives of freedom, mapped out long since, has come. This is no longer the voice of prophets, the dream of utopists, the creed of sectarian and fanatics, as we were called, it is the urgent call of Progress, the demand of the hour. Anarchism, as we understand now, could not enter in practical contact with life, as long as—not so very long ago—all the authoritarian forces were powerful and prosperous, but it can and might now, when natural inexorable evolution itself has routed all the authoritarians, the socialists included. This immense historical fact establishes the contact and now we can be directly useful to Humanity to point out the road to Freedom, and this will also clear our own road, and our cause will win, as it is that of struggling and progressive Humanity itself.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Max Nettlau
On the Divide
The Outgoing Authoritarian and the Incipient Libertarian Age
July 4, 1932

Retrieved on 11th May 2023 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Transcribed and edited by Shawn P. Wilbur.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net